

The Confessor's Tongue for March 26, A. D. 2023

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Leavetaking of Annunciation, Archangel Gabriel

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 Annunciation of the Theotokos

"Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the mystery which is from before the ages: the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin" (Troparion of Annunciation). Thus, with a song of praise, our Church greets the Great Feast of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Mother of God, calling it the beginning of our salvation. And justifiably, for this feast is one of the most important feasts of our Church Year.

St. Athanasios the Great (+373) in his sermon the Annunciation, calls this feast the first in the list of feasts, for it begins the work of salvation of the human race. The basis for this feast is the joyful annunciation recorded in St. Luke 1:26-38. the Annunciation is the first in a whole series of great mysteries in the life of Jesus Christ and his Most Holy Mother.

The Archangel's message of the Incarnation of the Son of God was the good news that fallen man had awaited for thousands of years. The fullness of time has come, the Virgin who can bear God in her womb is ready and willing, and God now becomes man to accomplish our salvation, to unite man with Himself through His Son.

At this feast, which almost always occurs during the Great Fast, an irresistible force hits an immovable object. The Great Fast is so strict that it does not permit the festive Divine Liturgy to be served on weekdays, only on Saturdays and Sundays. Instead during the week of the Fast, we commune at the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts, partaking of Mysteries consecrated at Liturgy the previous Sunday. That way we may be nourished by the Eucharist in our contest but not break the fast. Yet a Great Fast is always festive and requires and Divine Liturgy to keep it. How, then, may the feast be kept without breaking the Fast? The Liturgy of the Feast Day is served, but only at the end of the day after keeping the fast all day. Then the Liturgy of St. John, appended to the first half of Vespers in what we call a Vesperal Liturgy is served. Thus, after keeping fast during the day, we break it at the end of the day to keep the feast, which is celebrated with consumption of fish, wine, and oil.

In this way, both imperatives are observed: keeping the fast and celebrating the feast. (This year, falling on a Saturday, the feast was observed normally.)

The Feast has a forefeast of one day, and an afterfeast of one day (today).

St. Theophan on Wandering Thoughts

Thoughts wander when one is reading spiritual works and during prayer. What should one do? No one is free from this. There is no sin in it, only vexation. Having wandering thoughts becomes a sin when one

willingly allows flightiness of mind. But if thoughts scatter involuntarily, what fault can there be? There is fault, though, when one notices thoughts wandering and, taking no action, one wanders along with them. When we catch our thoughts wandering off, we must bring them back to their proper place at once.

The Commandments of Christ

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

Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. Luke 16:9

Christ offers this command in conclusion to what is perhaps His strangest parable—that of the unjust steward. Here it is:

And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, An hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore. And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.

In commenting on this parable, Blessed Theophylact instructs the one seeking understanding to focus on the central point of the parable and not try to extract meaning from every detail, for though the parable "indirectly and figurative reveals the nature of certain things, it is not similar in every respect to the things which it describes." The teaching of the parable may be thus expressed: man owns nothing of his own but is a steward of all that God has given him; he should administer what is given to him in such a way that it will benefit him eternally when his stewardship in this life is over and he seeks entrance to everlasting habitations.

"Mammon" is wealth, property, material goods. Christ uses the word four times in the Gospels: once in Matthew ("no man can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and mammon"), and three times in this chapter of Luke, where, in verse 11, He contrasts unrighteous mammon with true riches, and in verse 13 He repeats what He said in Matthew. Important light

is thrown on the matter by verse 11: "If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" The unrighteous mammon of this world, its wealth, property, material goods, are, then, a test for us to qualify us for use of true riches. Use this world's wealth well, and you will be entrusted with true riches; use it poorly, and you will not.

The primary way in which we use the mammon of unrighteous well is to meet our real needs and the needs of others with it rather than to spend it on pleasures. This first of all means almsgiving: giving to those in need of the basic necessities of life. What is given as alms is given directly to Christ; the good done to a beggar is done to Christ. Giving alms stores up treasure in heaven. It frees man from attachment to earthly things that he may desire the things of God. Almsgiving also elicits prayer from the beneficiary on the giver's behalf. On the other hand, to use the wealth entrusted to us solely for our own comfort and pleasure once our basic needs for food, clothes, and shelter are met is not to use it wisely, for it increases one's attachment to the world and does nothing to help us enter the kingdom.

The thrust of the parable and the command goes against many of our native notions and the flow of consumer culture where money is seen as a means to comfort, pleasure, and status. If you've earned it, it is yours to spend as you wish; the government programs are there to care for the poor, so you yourself need not bother. The flow of consumerism is so strong that many Americans have freighted themselves with heavy burdens of personal debt arising from desires they would not defer until they had the money. With easy credit, they bought what they desired, which, as desires tend to be unlimited, was more than they could handle on their limited income. Christians in this situation must repent and rethink their whole approach to mammon.

The unjust steward was shrewd. He used his position to benefit his lord's debtors and to obligate them to himself so that when he lost his position, he could collect on the debt of gratitude each debtor owed him. Jesus says the children of this world are more shrewd in their use of worldly things than the children of light, but He would have his own children use the mammon of unrighteousness to their eternal benefit.

Music, Vigil, Prayer *St. Barsanuphius of Optina*

In its aspiration for the New Jerusalem, the city of the Lord, the soul at times finds consolation in music. In the world, I loved serious music, like Beethoven and Schubert. I once went to a concert. A friend of mine met me and asked: "Where are you coming from, and why are you so happy and exultant?"

"I've been to a concert. What marvellous music! What delight it leads to soul to!"

"Well, there are even higher delights, different ones. If you would only go off in that direction, it would lead you into another realm, to the realm of the delight of prayer."

And he was not lying to me. I loved to attend church, especially the All-night Vigil in our Resurrection Cathedral. I loved the semi-darkness, the gentle twinkling light of the lampadas. It was exceptionally nice to pray there.

And here you are, going to the Vigil now; pray there. Try to pray properly; try to enter into and be immersed within yourselves. You know, in each person there exists a world of unspeakable beauty, in which are hidden many pure delights and ineffable joys. Go within yourself and they will be revealed to you.

Don't expect, however, only delights from prayer; don't despair when you don't feel any joys. In fact, it even happens that you stand and stand in church and it's as if you don't have a heart inside you, but a chunk of wood, and an unplaneable one at that. Well, what of it? Thank the Lord for the chunk of wood. It means that this was what was needed. You see, another soul, having experienced lofty delights, might get a swelled head. A condition like "stony insensibility" humbles him down. We can't demand prayerful bliss from God. From us is demanded prayerful labor, but joys are sent by God when it's pleasing to God and to our benefit. And so, let us pray to Him and rely in everything on His holy will!

Why Orthodoxy Should Not Change with the Times *St. Theophan the Recluse*

It reached my ears that, as it seems, you consider my sermons very strict and believe that today no one should think this way, no one should be living this way and therefore, no one should be teaching this way. "Times have changed!"

How glad I was to hear this. This means that you listen carefully to what I say, and not only do you listen, but you are also willing to abide by it. What more could we hope for, we who preach as we were ordered and as much we were ordered?

Despite all this, in no way can I agree with your opinion. I even consider it my duty to comment on it and to correct it, since – even though it perhaps goes against your desire and conviction – it comes from something sinful, as though Christianity could alter its doctrines, its canons, its sanctifying ceremonies to answer to the spirit of each age and adjust itself to the changing tastes of the sons of this century, as though it could add or subtract something.

Yet, it is not so. Christianity must remain eternally unchanging, in no way being dependent on or guided by the spirit of each age. Instead, Christianity is meant to govern and direct the spirit of the age for anyone who obeys its teachings. To convince you of this, I will put forward some thoughts for you to consider.

Some said that my teaching is strict. First of all, my teaching is not my own, nor it should be. In this sacred office nobody should, nor even can, preach his own teaching. If I or someone else ever dare to do so, you can put us outside the Church.

We preach the teachings of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of the holy Apostles, and the Holy Church, which is guided by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we make sure to do everything possible to keep these teachings whole and inviolate in your minds and hearts. Every thought we present and every word we use, we do so very carefully, so as not to overshadow this brilliant and divine teaching in any way. Nobody can act differently.

...a single raising of your mind to God, and a single humble genuflection to His glory and in His honor has infinitely more value than all the treasures of the world... [-St Nicodemos and Theophan the Recluse (Unseen Warfare: Chapter 20)]

Such a law that calls for each man's preaching in the Church to be "God-sent," was established at the creation of the world, and should thus remain valid until the end of the world. The Prophet Moses, after the delivery of the commandments from God Himself to the people of Israel, concluded: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you." (Deut. 4:2)

This law of constancy is so unalterable that the Lord and Savior Himself, when He was teaching the people on the mountain, said: "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Math. 5:17-18)

Then He gave the same validity to his teaching, before interpreting the commandments in the spirit of the gospel, by adding: "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." (Math. 5:19)

This means that anyone who wrongly interprets the commandments of God and lessens their validity, will be an outcast in the future life. This is what He said at the beginning of His preaching. He assured the same thing to Saint John the Theologian, the beholder of ineffable revelations, to whom He described the final judgement of the world and the Church, indicating in the Apocalypse (Book of Revelations): "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book." (Apoc. 22:18-19)

From the time of His first appearance in the world until the Second Coming, Christ has given the Holy Apostles and their successors the following law:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." (Math. 28:19-20)

That means "for you to teach, not what anyone else could possibly imagine, but what I ordered, and this to the end of the world." And He adds: "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen." (Math. 28:20)

The Apostles received this law and sacrificed their lives in order to keep it. And to those who wanted to keep them from preaching what it was they preached under the threat of punishment and death, they replied: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20)

This clear law was delivered by the apostles to their successors, was accepted by them, and has timeless effect in the Church of God. Because of this law, the Church is the pillar and the ground of truth. Can you see then what an inviolable steadfastness it has? After that, who would be so bold as to stubbornly disturb or move anything in Christian doctrine and law?

Next listen to what is said of the Prophet Ezekiel who for seven days was in the ecstasy of prayer and after seven days heard the word of the Lord: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth" (Ezek. 3:17), and he declared to the people: Here is the law for you! If you see a wicked person committing iniquity and you do not tell him: leave your iniquity and change your way, "that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand." (Ezek. 3:18) Conversely, "if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul." (Ezek. 3:19-21)

What a strict law! And though it sounds in the consciences of all pastors during their election and consecration, when a heavy yoke is put on them, namely the instruction of the flock of Christ that He entrusted to them, big or small, not only to guide it but also to preserve it. How could anyone be so bold, to pervert everything in the law of Christ, when this involves the destruction of both pastors and flock?

If the saving power of this teaching depended on our opinion of it and our consent to it, it would make sense for someone to imagine rebuilding Christianity according to human weaknesses or the claims of the age and adapt it according to the sinful desires of his heart. But the saving power of Christian law does not

at all depend on us, but on the will of God, by the fact that God Himself established precisely the exact path of salvation. Beyond this there is no other way, nor could it exist. Therefore, anyone who teaches in any other way, is deviating from the true path and is destroying himself and you. What logic is there in that?

Notice how strict judgment was mentioned when something similar happened to the nation of Israel during the difficult years of their captivity. Some prophets out of pity for the suffering and sick talked to the people, not as the Lord had ordered, but as their heart dictated. Concerning them the Lord gave the following commands to Ezekiel: "And you, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own minds. Prophesy against them and say, Thus says the Lord God: Woe to the women who sew magic bands upon all wrists, and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature, in the hunt for souls." (Ezek. 13:17-18) This means: Woe to those who order any kind of special treatment and suggest such leniency, so no one feels the slightest displeasure, either from those on top or those at the bottom, not caring whether this is for their salvation or destruction, whether it is pleasing to God, or repulsive. Woe to them, because "thus says the Lord God...your pillows and veils," namely your candied and comforting teaching, "upon which there you are perverting souls, I will tear from your arms and I will let their souls that you are perverting, go away..." (Ezek. 13:20-21) from this teaching of yours and I will destroy you corrupters.

This is the benefit of this special treatment and leniency, such as you want to hear from preachers! When you put all this deep in your heart, it is not right for you to want us to make any concessions in Christian doctrine, having the wrong desire to be pleased by us. On the contrary, you are obliged to persistently demand from us to remain true to doctrine, as strictly and firmly as possible.

Have you ever heard of the indulgences of the Pope of Rome? Here is what they are: special treatment and leniency, which he gives defying the law of Christ. And what is the result? From all of this, the West is corrupt in faith and in their way of life, and is now getting lost in its disbelief and in the unrestrained life with its indulgences.

The Pope changed many doctrines, spoiled all the sacraments, nullified the canons concerning the regulation of the Church and the correction of morals. Everything has begun going contrary to the will of the Lord, and has become worse and worse.

Then came along Luther, a smart man, but stubborn. He said, "The Pope changed everything as he wanted, why shouldn't I do the same?" He started to modify and re-modify everything in his own way, and in this way established the new Lutheran faith, which only slightly resembles what the Lord had commanded and the Holy Apostles delivered to us. After Luther came the philosophers. And they in turn said, "Luther has established himself a new faith,

supposedly based on the Gospel, though in reality based on his own way of thinking. Why, then, don't we also compose doctrines based on our own way of thinking, completely ignoring the Gospel?" They then started rationalizing, and speculating about God, the world, and man, each in his own way. And they mixed up so many doctrines, that one gets dizzy just counting them.

Now the Westerners have the following views: Believe what you think best, live as you like, satisfy whatever captivates your soul. This is why they do not recognize any law or restriction and they do not abide by God's word. Their road is wide, all obstacles displaced. Their way is broad, all the obstacles taken out. But the broad road leads to perdition, according to what the Lord says. This is where leniency in teaching has led! Lord, save us from this broad way! But it is better to love each difficulty that the Lord has appointed for our salvation. Let us love Christian doctrines and let us compel our mind with them, pushing it not to think otherwise. Let us love Christian morals and let us compel our will in them, forcing it to lift the light yoke of the Lord humbly and patiently. Let us love all Christian rituals and services which guide us, correct us, and sanctify us. Let us compel our heart with them, encouraging it to convey its desires from the earthly and perishable, to the heavenly and imperishable.

Let us confine ourselves as though in a cage. Or better, let us drag ourselves, as if we were passing through a narrow passage. Let it be narrow, so no one can deviate neither to the right left, nor the left. Yet undoubtedly, through this narrow way we will obtain the kingdom of the heavens in return. For as you know, this kingdom is the kingdom of the Lord. The Lord laid this narrow way and said, "Follow exactly this route and you will obtain the kingdom of heaven." Could anyone then doubt whether the traveler will get to his destination? And what mind would one have who starts wanting all kinds of annulment of the commandments, when by doing this he would immediately lose his way and be lost?

Once you have fully understood this assertion, do not worry if something in our teaching seems to be strict. The only thing you should strive for is to carefully make sure if it is from the Lord. And after you have made sure it is from the Lord, accept it with all your heart, no matter how strict or obliging it may be. And not only avoid wanting special treatment and leniency with doctrine and the ethics, but even flee from all these, as though fleeing from the fire of Gehenna. Those who cannot escape from this are those who think up such things and with them lure those who are spiritually weak to follow them. Amen.

December 29, 1863 - Sunday after Christ's Birth

Upcoming Events 2023

9-15 April Holy Week
16 April Great & Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!