

The Confessor's Tongue, Sunday of the Blindman, May 21, 2023

Christ is Risen! Indeed, He is Risen!

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.

Prayer to Guardian Angel

The last time I heard Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver preach, he mentioned how every day he invokes his guardian angel, asking his prayers and protection, and he encouraged his listeners to do the same.

While both morning and evening prayers contain one prayer each to one's guardian angel, we may not pray them at all or we may pray them lacking feeling. But let us stop to reflect that God has granted each of us an angel to guard us, watch over us, prompt us to good works and dissuade us from sin. One of the host of heaven is assigned to you as his duty. His job is you. He sees all you do. He hears all you say. He aims to help you do right and to keep you from evil. He resists the demons assigned to tempt you. You grieve him with your sins. You make him rejoice with your repentance, prayer, and good deeds.

Consider this angelic being assigned to your life. How many times has he kept you from committing sin? How many times has he tried to keep you from sin, but you pushed ahead into it anyway? How many times has he reminded you to pray, or suggested that you do something to help another? This angel is with you, beside you. He is able to hear you. Do you ask him for help? Do you ask his prayers? He knows how to pray to God with greater confidence than you do.

We may pray to him in a number of ways. We may say to him, "Angel of Christ, my holy guardian, protect me from all evil." We may use the prayers found in the morning or evening prayers. We may use the canon to the guardian angel. There is an akathist to the guardian angel. Here is a sessional hymn found in the canon, that I think is worthy of use outside of praying the canon. It may be sung or recited.

Sessional Hymn, tone 2

In fervent love, I cry to thee, O Guardian of my soul,
my all-holy Angel:
protect and keep me always from the entrapment of the evil one.
Direct me to the heavenly life,
enlightening, illuminating, and strengthening me.

Here is the kontakion to the guardian angel, which is also worthy of regular use.

Kontakion, tone 4

Show thyself full of loving kindness toward me
O holy angel of the Lord, my guardian,
and do not hide thyself from me who am defiled,
but rather enlighten me with unapproachable
light
and make me worthy of the kingdom of heaven.

By using these prayers regularly we ask help of one whom God has assigned to help us but whom we may

unjustly and unwisely neglect. How often has he been ready to help us, but did not, because we did not ask. After the day of judgment, it will be interesting to talk to our angel face to face and learn just how much he did for us. May we all make better us of him now!

Homeschooling Co-Operative

This coming week, we shall complete two years of our formal homeschooling co-operative here at St. Maximus.

The ultimate purpose of the St Maximus Homeschool Co-op is to more thoroughly inculcate in our homeschooled children an Orthodox Christian worldview so that they more tightly be united to Christ and in the end secure eternal well-being in the Kingdom of God. This depends first of all in more deeply immersing children in the Liturgical life of the Church than can be accomplished on Sunday morning only. Attending the Thursday Liturgy, the Hours on Tuesday and Thursdays, receiving instruction from Scripture, hearing the lives of the saints, reading, singing, and being together with other Orthodox Christian believers work towards this end.

The classes offered are not meant to provide a full educational curriculum (that is done by parents at home), but to help develop a Christian way of living and thinking and to support parents in subjects they may not be able to offer alone. We teach some Bible, history, patristics, geography, Russian, singing and music, nature studies, art, and literature, among other things. We also build community by eating and cleaning together, playing together, taking field trips together, studying and worshipping together.

Everything we do in life must be considered in the light of eternity. Another way to say this is that the most important matter of our short lives is the matter of working out our salvation. As our Lord said, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his soul?"

Our once-Christian Western world has largely rejected Christ. It has reduced education as preparation for service in a technologically driven society, a *technopoly* as Neil Postman has called it, which recognizes no values outside the material world discerned by the five senses. The world is inert, dead matter that exists for us to conquer, exploit, and manipulate to serve our needs and desires. Man is the measure of all things, and by his reason and technology, he can make himself a god, make himself whatever he fancies himself to be. Our public schools and even our private schools largely reflect this vision and fail to provide true answers to fundamental questions such as What is ultimate reality? What is Man? What is his purpose in life? How can he achieve it?

As Orthodox Christians, we have answers to these

questions. As parents, we have the responsibility to impart the answers to these questions to our children. We have the responsibility to form them in the ascetic, sacramental life of the Church. Rooted in the life of Christ in His body the Church, they are planted to bear fruit in this world, to be witnesses to the truth of Christ and that there is more to life than the material world, to please God in this life and to find entrance into the eternal well-being of the kingdom of Heaven.

We formed our co-op to support parents in this endeavor. To help root their children in the ascetic, sacramental life of the church. To study the scriptures, to hear the lives of the saints, to build a living, local community of love and support, to gain and Orthodox worldview and begin to see how that view affects every area of study. To see the world as the Lord's and the fullness thereof. To know that The world is in God and God is in the world, that the material world is a means of communion with God if we approach it properly. That we are stewards of this world, not owners, and we have to give an account to God for how we use it—for it is His.

We are still finding our way in all this. But we see the need to reconceive the notion of education and reform it according to our Christian worldview, not just baptize a worldly approach. For school to be a matter of learning academic subjects, positioning oneself for entrance into college so as to earn a degree and get a good job—this is a debased view, unworthy of Christian man, one that needs to be challenged at every point—so that our children may live in Christ, be good stewards of His world, and may not live to gain the world at the cost of their souls.

However we choose to educate our children—homeschool, homeschool with co-op, public school, or private school, it is our duty to communicate a Christian world view and deep concern for things of eternal value to our children. May the Lord help us all in this weighty endeavor! *Fr. Justin*

The Commandments of Christ

“If you love Me, you will keep my commandments.”

Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Matthew 5:11-12

Lest we should think the Christian life is about worldly comfort, success, and respect in this life, Christ warns us not only to expect persecution (John 15:20), but commands us to rejoice in it. What a command! “Rejoice when you are persecuted for righteousness’ sake!” Christ by this command overturns the world’s values, which hold persecution to be misfortune.

Persecution entails injustice or wrong done to someone because of their identity as a Christian. It is discrimination in the bad sense of that word. It means

to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict. To revile someone is to launch a scurrilous, abusive attack prompted by anger or hatred. The men launching these attacks are lying—they speak falsely and act on a false premises. If a Christian has done wrong, then he suffers justly for his wrongdoing. But if he has done nothing wrong, then he is blessed for suffering wrong.

But what persecution do we undergo in our time? In regard to persecution, we readily think of the martyrs, both the old martyrs under the Romans and the new martyrs of more recent time under the Turks and the Communists, who certainly endured persecution. From the Apostles on down to the present, true Christians have rejoiced to suffer the loss of their lives for the sake of Christ, considering themselves fortunate to be counted worthy to share in Christ’s sufferings.

Yet persecution need not mean the shedding of blood and loss of life. St. Paul informs St. Timothy, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” How many of us have been mocked or attacked by family members because we have become Orthodox? This is persecution for righteousness’ sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. How many of us have been teased at school because we dress modestly, because we won’t allow our virginity to be violated, or because we won’t cheat on tests? This is persecution for righteousness’ sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. How many times have we incurred the displeasure of others at work, lost favor with the boss, or even been fired because we refused to be party to dishonest business practices? This is persecution for righteousness’ sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. Every time we choose to tell the truth rather than resort to the convenient lie and are abused for it, every time we refuse to get drunk or do drugs with pressuring friends despite their mockery, every time we pray and make the sign of the cross in public despite the possible displeasure of others, every time we seek to do what is right in God’s eyes and are laughed at or threatened for our stand, we are being persecuted for righteousness’ sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice.

The Christians bears witness to the truth of Christ by his words and actions. Those in the darkness of sin hate the light the Christian brings and lash out against it and the bearer. The Christian must understand and accept this reality. He also must know the words of Solomon: “Like a trampled spring and a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked” (Proverbs 25:26). Much evil is done in the world when the righteous fail to speak out against evil. When he goes along with it to get along or is simply silent, the righteous may avoid persecution, but he becomes like a dirtied well from which no one can drink. When he bears witness to the truth by word and example, he remains a pure spring, though his fidelity to the truth and to his Master invites persecution.

Do we rejoice in whatever persecution come to us? Or are we fearful and lament and complain to God? God sees those who are His, those who will stand up to do what is right despite the world's opposition, and He will bless them not only in this life but promises them a great reward in heaven. A great reward awaits those who endure the 'momentary light affliction' living as a Christian in this world. The affliction, the persecution is real, and we must expect it. But Christ is with us in it, and the reward He promises us for enduring is cause for rejoicing.
Fr. Justin Frederick

The Rule For Attending To Oneself For One Dwelling In The World

By St. Ignatii Brianchaninov

The soul of all practices in the Lord is vigilance. Without vigilance, all these practices are fruitless. He who is desirous of saving himself must so establish himself that he might remain continuously vigilant toward himself, not only in solitude, but also under conditions of distraction, into which he is sometimes unwillingly drawn by circumstances.

Let the fear of God outweigh all other sensations upon the scales of your heart; and then will it be convenient to for you to be vigilant toward yourself, both in the silence of your cell and in the midst of the noise that surrounds you from all sides.

A well-reasoned moderation in foodstuffs, diminishing the passionate heat of his blood, tends greatly to facilitate your being able to attend to yourself; while the impassioning of your blood, stemming, as it does, from an excessive consumption of foodstuffs, from extreme and intensified bodily movements, from the inflammation of wrath, from being heady with vanity, and by reason of other causes, gives rise to a multitude of thoughts and reveries—in other words, to distraction. The Holy Fathers, first of all, ascribe to such a one as is desirous of attending to himself a moderate, evenly-measured, constant abstinence from food.

Upon awakening from sleep—an image of the awakening from the dead, which awaits all men—direct your thoughts to God, offering up to Him the first-thoughts of your mind, which has not yet become imprinted with any vain impressions whatsoever.

Having carefully fulfilled all the needs of the flesh upon arising from sleep, quietly read your customary rule of prayer, taking care not so much for the quantity of your prayerful expression, as for the quality of it; i.e., do it attentively, so that, by reason of your attention, your heart might be enlightened and enlivened through prayerful feeling and consolation. Upon concluding your rule of prayer, do you again, direct all your strength to the attentive reading of the New Testament, primarily the Gospel. In the course of this reading, intently take note of all the instructions and commandments of Christ, so that

you might direct all your actions—both manifest and veiled—in accordance with them.

The quantity of the reading is determined by one's strength and by one's circumstances. It is unnecessary to weight-down one's mind with an excessive reading of prayers and Scripture; likewise, is it unnecessary to neglect one's needs in order to practice immoderate prayer and reading. Just as the excessive use of foodstuffs disorders and weakens the belly, so too does the immoderate use of spiritual food weaken the mind and create in it a revulsion to pious practices, leading it to despair.

For the novice, the Holy Fathers suggest frequent—but brief—prayers. When one's mind matures with spiritual age, becoming stronger and more manly, then shall one be in proper condition to pray without ceasing. It is to such Christians as have attained to maturity in the Lord that the words of the Apostle Paul pertain:

"I desire, therefore, that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without anger and reproach." (I Tim. II, 8) i.e., dispassionately, and without any distraction or inconstancy. For that which is natural to the man is not yet natural to the infant. Enlightened, through prayer and reading, by our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, one may then go forth to carry out the affairs of one's daily course, vigilantly taking care that in all one's deeds and words, in one's entire being, the All-holy will of God might prevail, as it was revealed and explained to men in the Commandments of the Gospel.

Should there be any free moments during the course of the day, use them to read attentively some chosen prayers, or some chosen portions of Scripture; and, by means of these, fortify the powers of your soul, which have become exhausted through activity in the midst of a world of vanities.

Should there not be any such golden moments, it is necessary to regret their loss, as though it were the loss of a valuable treasure. What is wasted today should not be lost on the day following, because our heart conveniently gives itself up to negligence and forgetfulness, which lead to that dismal ignorance, so ruinous of Divine activity, of the activity of man's salvation.

Should you chance to say or to do something that is contrary to God's commandments, immediately treat your fault with repentance; and, by means of sincere contrition, return to the Way of God, from which you stepped aside through your violation of God's will. Do not linger outside the Way of God! Respond with faith and humility to sinful thoughts, reveries and sensations by opposing to them the Gospel commandments, and saying, along with the holy patriarch Joseph:

How shall I speak this evil word and sin before God? (Gen. 30:9)

One who is vigilant toward oneself must refuse himself all reverie, in general—regardless of how attractive and well-appearing it might seem, for all reverie is the wandering of the mind, which flatters

and deceives it, while being outside the truth, in the land of non-existent phantoms, and incapable of realization. The consequences of reverie are: loss of vigilance toward oneself, dissipation of the mind, and hardness of heart during prayer, whence comes distress of the soul.

In the evening, departing into slumber—which, in relation to the day just past, is death—examine your actions during the course of that day. Such [self-] examination is not difficult, since, in leading an attentive life, that forgetfulness which is so natural to a distracted man is destroyed through vigilance toward oneself. And so, having recollected all your sins, whether through act, or word, or thought, or sensation, offer your repentance to God for them, with both the disposition and the heart-felt pledge of self-amendment. Later, having read the rule of prayer, conclude the day which was begun by meditating upon God by meditating, once again, upon God. Whither do they depart—all the thoughts and feelings of a sleeping man? What mysterious state of being is this sleep, during which the soul and body are both alive and yet not alive, being alienated from the awareness of their life, as though dead? Sleep is as incomprehensible as death. In the course of it, one's soul reposes, forgetting the most-cruel earthly afflictions and calamities that have beset it, while it images its eternal repose; while one's body (!) ... if it rises from sleep will also arise, inevitably, from the dead.

The great Agafon said: "It is impossible to succeed in virtue without exerting vigilance toward oneself." (*The Patericon of Skete*) Amen.

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The Virtues 2: Faith

Fr. Thomas Hopko

The foundation of all Christian virtue and life is faith. Faith is the natural possession of all men who are wise and virtuous. For if a person lacks faith in man's ability to know, to do good and to find meaning in life; if he does not believe that this is possible, profitable and worthy of man's efforts, then nothing wise or virtuous can be achieved. The striking characteristic of all prophets of doom, apostles of despair and preachers of absurdity is the absence of faith in man's capabilities for goodness and truth, and the absence of faith in the meaning and value of life. It is also an absence of faith in God.

Faith in God is the fundamental virtue of all the saints (cf. Heb 11). The prototype of the believer in God is Abraham, the father of Israel.

The promise to Abraham and his descendants that they should inherit the world did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

That is why righteousness depends on faith in order to guarantee it to all his descendants . . . who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all . . . in the presence of God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. That is why his faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). But the words "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake only, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in Him that

raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom 4:13-25).

Faith in God is fundamental for the spiritual life. And to believe in God is to believe in His Son Jesus Christ as well.

Let not your hearts be troubled, you believe in God, believe also in Me. [. . .] Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me; or else believe Me for the sake of My works themselves (Jn 14:1-11).

Faith in Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God," is the center of the Christian life and the foundation of the Church (Mt 16:16). It is the source of all wisdom, power and virtue. It is the means by which man can know and do all things, for "all things are possible to him who believes" (Mk 9:23, Mt 17:20).

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing (Jn 15:4-5).

Faith, first of all, is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). It is confidence in the spiritual capabilities of man and in the goodness and power of God. It is intellectual assent and existential everyday trust in the promises and gifts of God, given to the world in creation and in salvation in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Faith itself is a "gift of God" given to all and accepted by the poor in spirit and the pure in heart, who are open to the activity of God in their lives (Eph 2:8).

Genuine faith is not a blind leap in the dark, an irrational and unreasonable acceptance of the unreasonable and the absurd. Genuine faith is eminently reasonable; it is rooted and grounded in man's reasonable nature as made in the image of God. Not to believe, according to the scriptures and the saints, is the epitome of absurdity and foolishness.

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good.

The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely that seek after God.

(Pss 14:1-2, 53:1-2)

Man was made to have faith in God. Not to believe in God is a perversion of human nature and the cause of all evils. The weakness and absence of faith in God is rooted in sin, impurity and pride. It is never simply the result of an intellectual mistake or mental confusion. It is always the result of the suppression of the truth through wickedness, the exchange of God's truth for a lie, the refusal, consciously or unconsciously, to acknowledge God with honor and thanksgiving (cf. Rom 1).

You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall see, but never perceive. For this people's heart has drawn dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes and bear with their ears, understand with their heart, and turn to Me to heal them (Is 6:9-10, Mt 13:14-15).

The spiritual person lives "by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal 2:20). The spiritual person is the one who, by the grace of God's Spirit, is faithful in all things.

Upcoming Events 2023

25 May Holy Ascension

29 May Memorial Day Picnic

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!