

The Confessor's Tongue for August 6, 2023

9th Sunday after Pentecost: Transfiguration of Our Lord

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.

August 6: Holy Transfiguration

One of the Twelve Great Feasts, the Transfiguration of Our Lord primarily proclaims and glorifies Christ's Divinity. On the mountain with Peter, James, and John, Christ was transfigured before them, shining brighter than the sun and revealing His divinity so far as His disciples could bear it without being consumed. Because Christ's Divinity is made manifest, the feast has also been called "the second Theophany."

Traditionally, the Transfiguration is considered to have taken place forty days before the Crucifixion. The feast was originally appointed for February, falling during the Great Fast, but since the joyfulness of feast was not in keeping with the lenten spirit of penitence and fasting, it was transferred to August 6 to be observed forty days before the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross.

Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man in one person, but He appeared to men who looked only on the external appearance to be only a man, for His Divinity was veiled except to the eye of faith. On Mt. Tabor, the veil was removed, and His Divine glory shone forth. It is the same at the weekly Eucharist at which Christ comes to us in the transformed bread and wine. We see bread and wine, just as the disciples and the people of Israel saw a man; but an infinitely greater reality is present to be perceived by the eyes of faith, the very Body and Blood of our Lord, which is our true food and our healing, and for us constitutes "the sacrament of transfiguration." By this mystery, we ourselves are transformed to become partakers of the Divine Nature.

Thus this Feast not only reveals Christ's Divinity, wrapped in humanity, it also reveals divinized human nature. Christ took our full human nature to transform it, to make us by grace what He is by nature. The Transfiguration reveals what we shall be when we no longer fall short of the glory of God, when we are glorified, or as St. John says, "When we see Him, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

The Kontakion of the Feast makes another point: by seeing Christ for who He truly was, the disciples would have no doubt when Jesus was crucified that He died voluntarily, not by compulsion. He chose to lay down His life; it was not taken from Him by force. Without this revelation, they and we might be tempted to think of Jesus as a weak man whose life was unjustly taken from Him by a corrupt state. Jesus Himself is emphatic on this point: "I lay My life down for the sheep . . . I lay down My life that I might take it again. No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." (John 10: 15-18)

It is customary to bless summer fruits at the feast. You are encouraged to bring fresh fruits to be blessed at the end of Vigil and Liturgy.

The Feast is celebrated for eight days through its Leavetaking August 13. We sing or say the Troparion and Kontakion at meals and during our usual prayers during this time.

Troparion, Tone 7

Thou wast transfigured upon the mountain, O Christ God, / showing Thy glory to Thy disciples as far as they could bear it. / Through the prayers of the Theotokos, / make Thine everlasting light shine also upon us sinners. / O Giver of Light, glory to Thee!

Kontakion, Tone 7

Upon the mountain wast Thou transfigured, O Christ God, / and Thy disciples beheld Thy glory as far as they could see it; / so that when they would behold Thee crucified, / they would understand that Thy suffering was voluntary, / and would proclaim to the world / that Thou art truly the Radiance of the Father.

Why We Wash Dishes

The construction of the current hall at St. Maximus was completed in 2013 in time to use it at Pascha. The following year, we installed the commercial dishwasher we have used until now. The choice to use a dishwasher rather than disposable cups, plates, and "silverware" is based on sound theological reasons upon which we shall now reflect.

Out of nothing, God created both the heavens (the invisible, spiritual realm) and the earth (the material universe). The crown and glory of the material realm is man, made in the image of God. The Creator made the earth for man, to serve him, to support him. He gave man dominion over it and everything in it. But how are we to understand that dominion? Just what does it entail?

Some have taken man's dominion over the earth to mean absolute ownership. An absolute owner can do whatever he wishes with his property. He can clear-cut it, plow it, dig it up, farm it, regrade it, mine it, poison it, neglect it, pave it, develop it, put a strip mall on it—whatever he wants. Since the Reformation, when the sacramental view of nature began to be displaced, man has increasingly related to the world as his own possession independent of God. The world is man's. He can redirect rivers for irrigation, even when the result is to cause an inland sea to dry up (Aral Sea). He can turn farming over to big machinery and corporations, even though this erodes the topsoil and poisons the land and waters. He can build big cities in deserts where there is insufficient water by piping in water from elsewhere. He can pave over large patches of fertile soil to facilitate the speedy passage of his

machines, which also pollute. He can remove mountains to extract minerals to support his consumerist economy. He can build ugly buildings that are only habitable due to machines to control the interior environment. And so on.

Though God gave man made in His image dominion over the earth, the Holy Spirit declares through the Prophet David, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell in it." Man's dominion must, then, be understood as a delegated, relative dominion, not an absolute one. Though the Lord gave man dominion, the earth remains the Lord's. Thus as the Creator retains title to the earth and all it contains, any view of man having absolute dominion over the earth and its creatures is false. The earth remains the Lord's; He gives it to man, not absolutely, but conditionally, for man's use, to support his life.

The legal term "usufruct" well describes this sort of dominion. "Usufruct" comes from two Latin words which mean "use" and "fruit". It entails the right both to use the land and to enjoy the fruits of the land. Nevertheless, the usufruct holder's right to use the land is limited—he may not damage it or drastically alter it. Even though he uses it and enjoys its fruits, he holds it in trust for the owner.

The Orthodox Christian view, then, is that this world is the Lord's. He has blessed us to use it and to be supported by it, but we must take care of it for Him and not abuse it or harm it. (Hence a primary role for science emerges: to study the Creator's workmanship and understand it so that we can better use it without harming it. Today science is largely controlled by corporate interests. It studies how best to exploit the earth so that shareholders may maximally profit.) As we live here, as responsible children of our heavenly Father, we seek to care for His world and live in harmony with it rather than to do violence to it to force it to serve us in ways it was not intended to.

The abuse of the earth engendered by the desacralizing of man's view of it has spawned the ecological movement to try to protect the earth. That movement, however, is not grounded in the reality Christ and God's ownership of the earth. In its more radical and consistent forms, it tends to deify "mother earth" and treats man not as the glorious crown of creation but as a dangerous, destructive parasite that must be contained, if not eliminated. In its more popular forms, it has been cynically co-opted by big corporations, who use environmental laws to control competitors and to project a "green" image without true care for the earth under God. Neither of these approaches is consistent with Truth, with reality, and we who follow Christ can adopt neither of them.

The earth, like man, is a creature, subject to God's rule and will. It exists at every moment by God's creative and providential energies, totally dependent upon Him. To care properly for the earth requires that we see it as God's given to us in usufruct to support us. We are stewards of His property who

must love it and care for it, treasuring it as a precious gift given in love for good.

To buy disposable plates, cups, and silverware, to buy water bottled in plastic, etc., for use at the parish coffee hour -- is this responsible usufruct, or abuse? If we think of the labor, materials, and energy that goes into creating paper and plastic products that get used once and then are thrown away to be buried in a landfill or burned, we will see that this is not a responsible, God-honoring use of His creation. For these reasons, St. Maximus chooses to use real cups, plates, bowls, and silverware and to install water filters on our faucets so that we might lessen the abuse to which man subjects the earth. Doing this consciously at church calls us to take this mindset and the practices that flow from it to our homes—to consider how we live, that we may choose to live more in harmony with God's world rather than less and show ourselves true stewards of our Father's property.

Fr. Justin Frederick

Through Creation to the Creator, Part I

Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia

Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees.

-- Revelation 7:3

The saints embrace the whole world with their love.

-- St. Silouan the Athonite

On the Holy Mountain of Athos, the monks sometimes put up beside the forest paths special signposts, offering encouragement or warning to the pilgrim as he passes. One such notice used to give me particular pleasure. Its message was brief and clear: "Love the trees."

Fr. Amphilochios, the geronda or "elder" on the island of Patmos when I first stayed there, would have been in full agreement. "Do you know," he said, "that God gave us one more commandment, which is not recorded in Scripture? It is the commandment "love the trees." Whoever does not love trees, so he believed, does not love God. "When you plant a tree," he insisted, "you plant hope, you plant peace, you plant love, and you will receive God's blessing." An ecologist long before ecology had become fashionable, when hearing confessions of the local farmers he used to assign to them a penance, the task of planting a tree. During the long summer drought, he himself went round the island watering the young trees. His example and influence have transformed Patmos: photographs of the hillside near the Cave of the Apocalypse, taken at the start of the twentieth century, show bare and barren slopes, where today there is a thick and flourishing wood.

Fr. Amphilochios was by no means the first spiritual teacher in the modern Greek tradition to recognize the importance of trees. Two centuries earlier, the Athonite monk St. Kosmas the Aetolian, martyred in 1779, used to plant trees as he traveled around Greece on his missionary journeys, and in one of his "prophecies" he stated, "People will remain poor, because they have no love for trees." We can

see that prophecy fulfilled today in all too many parts of the world. Another saying attributed to him -- not in this instance about trees -- is equally applicable to the present age: "The time will come when the devil puts himself inside a box and starts shouting; and his horns will stick out from the roof-tiles." That often comes to my mind as I survey the skyline in London with its serried ranks of television masts.

"Love the trees." Why should we do so? Is there indeed a connection between love of trees and love of God? How far is it true that a failure to reverence and honor our natural environment -- animals, trees, earth, fire, air, and water -- is also, in an immediate and soul-destroying way, a failure to reverence and honor the living God?

Let us begin with two visions of a tree.

Have we not known, each of us, certain moments when we have started with sudden amazement at the lines before us on the printed page, words of poetry or prose which, once read, have forever remained luminous in our memory? One such moment happened to me at the age of eighteen as I was reading that magical anthology by Walter de la Mare, *Behold, This Dreamer*, and came across a passage from the book of Edward Carpenter, *Pagan and Christian Creeds*. "Has any one of us ever seen a tree?" asks Carpenter; and he answers, "I certainly do not think that I have -- except most superficially." He continues:

That very penetrating observer and naturalist, Henry David Thoreau, tells us that he would often make an appointment to visit a certain tree, miles away -- but what he saw when he got there, he does not say. Walt Whitman, also a keen observer ... mentions that, in a dream trance he actually once saw "his favorite trees step out and promenade up, down and around, very curiously." Once the present writer seemed to have a partial vision of a tree. It was a beech, standing somewhat isolated, and still leafless in quite early Spring. Suddenly, I was aware of its skyward-reaching arms and up-turned finger-tips, as if some vivid life (or electricity) was streaming through them far into the spaces of heaven, and of its roots plunged in the earth and drawing the same energies from below. The day was quite still and there was no movement in the branches, but in that moment the tree was no longer a separate or separable organism, but a vast being ramifying far into space, sharing and uniting the life of Earth and Sky, and full of amazement.

Two things above all are noteworthy in Edward Carpenter's "partial vision." First, the tree is alive, vibrant with what he calls "energies" or "electricity"; it is "full of most amazing activity." Second, the tree is cosmic in its dimensions: it is not "a separate or separable organism" but is "vast" and all-embracing in its scope, "ramifying far into space ... uniting the life of Earth and Sky."

Here is a vision of joyful wonder, inspired by an underlying sense of mystery. The tree has become a symbol pointing beyond itself, a sacrament that

embodies some deep secret at the heart of the universe. The same sense of wonder and mystery -- of the symbolic and sacramental character of the world -- is strikingly manifest in *Peaks and Llamas*, the master-work of that spiritual mountaineer, Marco Pallis.

Yet there are at the same time certain limitations in Carpenter's tree-vision. The mystery to which the tree points is not spelt out by him in specifically personal terms. He makes no attempt to ascend through the creation to the Creator. There is nothing directly theistic about his vision, no reference to God or to Jesus Christ.

Let us turn to a second tree-vision, which is by contrast explicitly personal and theophanic:

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your Father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Ex 3:1-6)

Comparing the experience of Moses with that of Carpenter, we observe three things: in the first place, the vision described in Exodus reaches out beyond the realm of the impersonal. The burning bush at Horeb acts as the locus of an interpersonal encounter, of a meeting face-to-face, of a dialogue between two subjects. God calls out to Moses by name, "Moses, Moses!" and Moses responds, "Here I am."

"Through the creation to the Creator": in and through the tree he beholds, Moses enters into communion with the living God. Nor is this all. On the interpretation accepted by the Orthodox Church, the personal encounter is to be understood in more specific terms. Moses does not simply meet God, but he meets Christ. All the theophanies in the Old Testament are manifestations, not of God the Father -- Whom "no one has ever seen" (John 1:18) -- but of the pre-incarnate Christ, God the eternal Logos. Visitors to St. Mark's in Venice will recall that in the mosaics depicting the story of Genesis 1, the face of God the Creator bears unmistakably the lineaments of Christ. In the same way, when Isaiah sees God enthroned in the temple, "high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1), and when Ezekiel sees in the midst of the wheels and of the four living creatures "something that seemed like a human form" (Ezekiel 1:26), it is Christ the Logos Whom they both behold.

In the second place, God does not only appear to Moses but also issues a practical command to him:

"Remove the sandals from your feet." According to Greek Fathers such as St. Gregory of Nyssa, sandals or shoes -- being made from the skins of dead animals -- are something lifeless, inert, dead and earthly, and so they symbolize the heaviness, weariness, and mortality that assail our human nature as a result of the Fall. "Remove your sandals," then, may be understood to signify: Strip off from yourself the deadness of familiarity and boredom; free yourself from the lifelessness of the trivial, the mechanical, the repetitive; wake up, open your eyes, cleanse the doors of your perception, look and see!

And what, in the third place, happens to us when in this manner we strip off the dead skins of boredom and triviality? At once we realize the truth of God's next words to Moses: "The place on which you are standing is holy ground." Set free from spiritual deadness, awakening from sleep, opening our eyes both outwardly and inwardly, we look upon the world around us in a different way. Everything appears to us, as it did to the infant Traherne, "new and strange ... inexpressibly rare, and delightful, and beautiful." We experience everything as vital and living, and we discover the truth of William Blake's dictum, "Every thing that lives is Holy."

So we enter the dimensions of sacred space and sacred time. We discern the great within the small, the extraordinary within the ordinary, "a world in a grain of sand ... and eternity in an hour," to quote Blake once more. This place where I am, this tree, this animal, this person to whom I am speaking, this moment of time through which I am living: each is holy, each is unique and unrepeatable, and each is therefore infinite in value.

Combining Edward Carpenter's living tree, uniting earth and heaven and the burning bush of Moses, we can see emerging a precise and distinctive conception of the universe. Nature is sacred. The world is a sacrament of the divine presence, a means of communion with God. The environment consists not in dead matter but in living relationship. The entire cosmos is one vast burning bush, permeated by the fire of divine power and glory:

Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes off his shoes, the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

Certainly there is nothing in itself wrong about plucking blackberries. But as we enjoy the fruits of the earth, let us also look beyond our own immediate pleasure, and discern the deeper mystery that surround us on every side.

Essence and Energies, Logos and logoi: Does such an approach lead us to pantheism? Not necessarily. As a Christian in the tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, I cannot accept any worldview that identifies God with the universe, and for that reason I cannot be a pantheist. But I find no difficulty in endorsing pantheism -- that is to say, the position which affirms, not "God is everything and everything is God," but "God is in everything and everything is in God." God, in other words, is both immanent and transcendent;

present in all things. He is at the same time above and beyond them all. It is necessary to emphasize simultaneously both halves of the paradox beloved of the poet Charles Williams: "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou."

Upholding this "pantheistic" standpoint, the great Byzantine theologian St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) safeguarded the otherness-yet-nearness of the Eternal by making a distinction-in-unity between God's essence and His energies. In His essence, God is infinitely transcendent, radically unknowable, utterly beyond all created being, beyond all understanding and all participation from the human side. But, in His energies, God is inexhaustibly immanent, the core of everything, the heart of its heart, closer to the heart of each thing than is that thing's very own heart. These divine energies, according to the Palamite teaching, are not an intermediary between God and the world, not a created gift that He bestows upon us, but they are God Himself in action; and each uncreated energy is God in His indivisible totality, not a part of Him but the whole.

By virtue of this essence-energies distinction, Palamas is able to affirm without self-contradiction:

Those who are counted worthy enjoy union with God the cause of all ... He remains wholly within Himself and yet dwells wholly within us, making us share not in His nature but in His glory and radiance.

In this way, God is revealed and hidden -- revealed in His energies, hidden in His essence:

Somehow He manifests Himself in His totality, and yet he does not manifest Himself; we apprehend Him with our intellect, and yet we do not apprehend Him; we participate in Him, and yet He remains beyond all participation.

Such is the antinomic stance of the true pantheist:

God both is and is not; He is everywhere and nowhere; He has many names and He cannot be named; He is ever-moving and He is immovable; and, in short, He is everything and nothing. *To Be Continued*

Upcoming Events 2023

1-14 August Dormition Fast
6 August Transfiguration of Our Lord
14 August Dormition of the Theotokos

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!