

# The Confessor's Tongue for August 27, 2023

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Venerable Poemen the Great

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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## Sayings of St. Poemen the Great

*The book The Sayings of the Desert Fathers contains 209 sayings attributed to St. Poemen, far more than to any other father. Here is a sampling.*

Abba Poemen said, "A man may seem to be silent, but if his heart is condemning others, he is babbling ceaselessly. But there may be another who talks from morning till night and yet he is truly silent; that is, he says nothing that is not profitable."

He also said, "If man remembered that it is written, 'By your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned' (Matt. 12:37), he would choose to remain silent."

He also said, "The beginning of evil is heedlessness."

A brother said to Abba Poemen, "If I see something, do you want me to tell you about it?" The old man said to him, "It is written: 'If one gives answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame' (Proverbs 18:13). If you are questioned, speak; if not, remain silent."

Abba Poemen said, "As the breath which comes out of his nostrils, so does a man need humility and the fear of God."

A brother asked Abba Poemen, 'What is a hypocrite?' The man said to him, 'A hypocrite is he who teaches his neighbor something he makes no effort to do himself. It is written, "why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye, etc."' (Mat 7:3-4)

A brother asked Abba Poemen, 'What shall I do, for fornication and anger war against me?' The old man said, 'In this connection David said: "I will pierce the lion and I will slay the bear"; that is to say: I will cut off anger and I will crush fornication with hard labor.'

Abba Poemen said, "To instruct your neighbor is the same thing as reproving him."

Abba Poemen said, 'It is written: "Give witness of that which your eyes have seen"; but I say to you even if you have touched with your hands, do not give witness. In truth, a brother was deceived in this respect; he thought he saw his brother in the act of sinning with a woman; greatly incensed, he drew near and kicked them (for he thought it was they), saying, "now stop,; how much longer will you go on?" Now it turned out that it was some sheaves of corn. That is the reason why I said to you: even if you touch with your hands, do not reprove.'

Abba Poemen was asked for whom this saying is suitable, 'Do not be anxious about tomorrow.' The old man said, 'It is said for the man who is tempted and has not much strength, so that he should not be worried, saying to himself, "How long just I suffer this temptation?" he should rather say every day to himself, "Today."'

## The Importance of Confession

*Elder Cleopa of Romania (+1998)*

Elder Cleopa emphasized the importance of repentance, insisting that the faithful seek the sacrament of Confession a minimum of four times each year. He always emphasized that it was up to the father confessor to decide if, when, and how often, the individual would partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. Reception of holy communion in Romania is not done frequently; in fact, it is very rare, even though most monasteries celebrate the Divine Liturgy daily. Regardless of how often one would have the blessing to approach the holy chalice, Fr. Cleopa insisted the confession be frequent and very thorough. He labored to draw the people back into a more sacramental life, instill in them that they must not partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord in a careless manner, but that they must first and foremost be cleansed of their sins.

He would frequently tell people, "When you see that someone in your home is sick, your mother or father, whoever, do not call the doctor right away, but call the priest first. The doctor cannot give someone an extra second of life; if he could, he would not give it to you, but to himself. Everything is according to the will of God! Call the priest and tell him, 'Father, hear my mother's/father's/etc. confession,' and the priest will hear what the person confesses and also ask him if he has committed this sin or another.

"In confession, the penitent should say that he has committed *all* sin, because if we do not commit a sin in deed, we do so in the mind or in thought. Finally, the priest will absolve the person through the grace that has been given to him by Christ. Then, you can call the doctor. If the person dies, having confessed sincerely and completely, the prayers of the Church can deliver him from the torments of hell during those next forty days, sometimes a little longer, but the Church does deliver him. But if the person dies without having confessed and is guilty of grave sins, he can find no deliverance, for without confession, there is no salvation."

Another counsel that he imparted to those who were sick, after writing down their names to be remembered at the Divine Liturgy, was this: "The most important service for those who are sick is Holy Unction; however, this should not be done for someone who has not confessed. First, you must confess all your sins, and then ask for Holy Unction with no fewer than three priests serving."

The elder strongly recommended that people go to their local parish priest as their spiritual father; but he would add that when someone wanted to make a very detailed confession, then that person should seek an elderly hieromonk in one of the monasteries. He always said that in cases when the faithful go to a monastery for confession, they are obligated to receive the

blessing of their local priest prior to going to the monastery and then they are bound to fulfill whatever penance the monastery priest would give them.

Throughout his own life, Fr. Cleopa had a number of spiritual fathers, all of whom left an imprint on the elder. There was never a time when he was without a spiritual father, even during his seclusion in the wilderness. Here again, we see that Fr. Cleopa did not counsel others to do something that he himself did not follow.

The elder heard countless confessions from those who came to him, and through the sacrament he gathered a multitude of souls for Christ. Whenever someone confessed to him, he gave the person a penance; however, he always asked the individual if he would fulfill the penance given him. If the penitent said that it was too much for him, then Fr. Cleopa would change the penance to something that could be fulfilled, always keeping in mind the age, strength and spiritual zeal of each person. His aim was always to lead people to true repentance and also slowly to encourage everyone to strive to the utmost in the spiritual life.

The elder spoke on the topic of confession quite often. We include here some of his words on this subject; although a few aspects may be repetitive, we must keep in mind that the following have been taken from several discussions during which the elder never used notes, but spoke freely. He felt that this subject was one of the most important topics that needed to be addressed, and we thank God for his words now in our own times and circumstances.

"One of the foremost spiritual obligations that we have, both as monastics and as lay people, is to confess our sins. We must first recognize that we all sin against God, some more than others, but no one is without sin.

"Holy Scripture bears testimony to this fact, saying, *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)*

"If, however, I did not approach this sacrament with a spirit of repentance and did not prepare myself properly; if I choose to go to a priest who is somewhat lax in these matters; if I did not confess thoroughly; if I hid my sins and did not follow the penance I received for them; if I did not later abandon these sins; then even if I were to be absolved a thousand times, the sin would still be in me like poison because I did not approach the sacrament of confession properly prepared.

"So, you see, the benefit and precious value of holy confession does not depend on the priest, but on the penitent. When I approach this sacrament, it must be with complete piety, with absolute conviction before the face of God—when I stand before the priest, I am truly standing before God, since the priest is only a witness—then I must reveal all of my sins. Do you think the priest can otherwise be of any help to you on the judgment day if you did not confess completely? God forbid! The priest cannot absolve things that you did not reveal in confession. If you held back and did not confess a particular sin, then all of the other sins will come back on you. This is what the holy fathers themselves have said, because this reserve, this refusal to confess something, shows that you think God does not know what you have done.

"These are some of the aspects that go into a full confession:

"First, confession must be made before a priest. You see, when I go before the priest for confession, I am really

standing before God. The priest is a simple witness. On the day of judgment, he can only bear witness to what I have said before him. He cannot absolve what I failed to say, either on earth or in heaven. If I went to confession and told all my sins and the priest placed his hands on my head and absolved me, then I am truly absolved.

"Second, confession must be thorough, with nothing hidden, as I have already said. Have you heard what the holy Apostle Paul said? *The word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of body and soul, the highest form of union between God and man.*

"Third, confession must be done of one's own free will, according to the Holy Spirit Who says, *You shall offer it of your own free will (Lev. 19:5).*

"Fourth, confession must be made with humility, for *A broken and contrite heart, God will not despise (Psm. 50:17).*

"Fifth, confession should never be accusatory; in other words, blame should never be placed on someone or something else, neither another person, another being in God's creation, not even the devil. In confession, we should blame only ourselves, as St. John Climacus says, 'It is my sore, it is my wound; it is the result of my slothfulness, not someone else's.'

"Sixth, confession must be completely truthful. Tell how you have committed all your sins without being embarrassed. Sirach says, *There is a shame that leads to sin, as well as a shame that is honorable and gracious (Sirach 4:25).*

"Seventh, confession has to be decisive. As we stand before the priest we must be determined that, with the help of divine grace, we will not longer commit those sins that we have confessed. We should be more willing to die a thousand times rather than willingly to sin again. St. Basil the Great tells us confession is ineffectual if the person says merely that he has sinned but then persists in the sin that he so abhors. No one should confess in this manner! All of your remorse is dependent on your determination to change your life. When I go to confession with an attitude of contrition and repentance, recognizing my sins, then I reveal all that I can remember to the priest. When you go to confession, you want to remember everything so that you can give a complete confession. Do not keep your eyes fixed on the priest; if you do that then the devil will make you forget everything you want to say! Before the confession, go in your room where it is quiet, take a notebook and write down all your sins from the time of your childhood until now when you will confess. What sins are still on my conscience from the time I was a child; when I was five years old; when I was seven years old; when I was in first grade, when I was in second grade when I was in ninth grade, when I was an adult; before marriage; after marriage; during military service; as a youth? Write everything down, because the devil has already written these things as well. We have very good bookkeepers: the devil on the left shoulder who records everything, and the guardian angel on the right shoulder, who records all of our good deeds.

### Upcoming Events 2023

28 August: 9:30 at the Cathedral Archbishop Dmitri memorial Liturgy  
1 September: Church New Year  
24 September: Annual Meeting  
15 October: 2:00 p.m. Oktoberfest  
12 November: Parish Thanksgiving Dinner

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!