

# The Confessor's Tongue for September 10, 2023

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Martyrs Menodora, Metrodora, and Nymphodora  
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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## **10 September: Martyrs Menodora, Metrodora, Nymphodora**

The Holy Virgins Menodora, Nymphodora, and Metrodora (305-311), were sisters from Bithynia (Asia Minor). Distinguished for their special piety, they wanted to preserve their virginity and avoid worldly associations. They chose a solitary place for themselves in the wilderness and spent their lives in deeds of fasting and prayer.

Reports of the holy life of the virgins soon spread, since healings of the sick began to occur through their prayers. The Bithynia region was governed at that time by a man named Frontonus, who ordered that the sisters be arrested and brought before him.

At first he tried to persuade them to renounce Christ, promising great honors and rewards. But the holy sisters steadfastly confessed their faith before him, rejecting all his suggestions. They told him that they did not value the temporal things of this world, and that they were prepared to die for their Heavenly Bridegroom, for death would be their gateway to eternal life.

Flying into a rage, the governor took out his wrath on Saint Menodora, the eldest sister. She was stripped of her clothes and beaten by four men, while a herald urged her to offer sacrifice to the gods. The saint bravely endured the torments and cried out, "Sacrifice? Can't you see that I am offering myself as a sacrifice to my God?" Then they renewed their torments with even greater severity. Then the martyr cried out, "Lord Jesus Christ, joy of my heart, my hope, receive my soul in peace." With these words she gave up her soul to God, and went to her Heavenly Bridegroom.

Four days later, they brought the two younger sisters Metrodora and Nymphodora to the court. They showed them the battered body of their older sister to frighten them. The virgins wept over her, but remained steadfast.

Then Saint Metrodora was tortured. She died, crying out to her beloved Lord Jesus Christ with her last breath. Then they turned to the third sister, Nymphodora. Before her lay the bruised bodies of her sisters. Frontonus hoped that this sight would intimidate the young virgin.

Pretending that he was charmed by her youth and beauty, he urged her to worship the pagan gods, promising great rewards and honors. Saint Nymphodora scoffed at his words, and shared the fate of her older sisters. She was tortured and beaten to death with iron rods.

The bodies of the holy martyrs were to be burned in a fire, but a heavy rain extinguished the blazing fire, and lightning struck down Frontonus and his servant. Christians took up the bodies of the holy sisters and

reverently buried them at the so-called Warm Springs at Pythias (Bithynia).

Part of the relics of the holy martyrs are preserved on Mt. Athos in the Protection cathedral of the Saint Panteleimon Russian monastery, and the hand of Saint Metrodora is on the Holy Mountain in the monastery of the Pantocrator. [oca.org](http://oca.org)

## **September 14: Exaltation of the Cross**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of September, the Church celebrates the Great Feast of the Exaltation (Elevation) of the Precious Cross. The Feast is the only one of the Great Feasts that does not commemorate some occasion in the life of either Christ or His mother. The day is a strict fast day.

The Feast commemorates two events: the finding of the Cross by St. Helen, mother of the Emperor Constantine, and the return of the Cross and its elevation before the faithful in 629, fifteen years after it was taken from Jerusalem by Persian invaders.

But more than this, the Feast calls us to celebrate Christ's glory and victory won on the Cross. Christ's agonizing death on the Cross was victory over Satan and sin, and the death of death. Thus we find the Cross indeed to be "precious" and "life-creating" for us. Christ's life-giving death on the Cross transformed it from a feared symbol of Roman public execution of criminals to the symbol of Christ's great love for mankind and of His victory over evil and the evil one. Hence we glory in the Cross of Christ, as St. Paul writes: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

At Vigil, there is a special ceremony of venerating the Cross. During the Praises of Matins, the priest vests fully. During the Great Doxology, he censes around the altar table three times. When the "Holy God" at the end of the Doxology is sung, he bears the Cross out of the altar to before the Royal Doors, and then deposits it on an analogion in the midst of the nave. Everyone sings "Before Thy Cross we bow down in veneration, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection, we glorify" three times, doing a full prostration each time. Then as special hymns to the cross are sung, each person comes to venerate the cross, prostrating twice, kissing the cross, and prostrating again. Having venerated the Cross, each person comes to be anointed with the blessed festal oil and to receive blessed Litia bread dipped in blessed wine.

The Church also honors Christ's Cross on August 1<sup>st</sup>, the Third Sunday of Great Lent, and every Friday (and Wednesday).

We celebrate the Feast through its Leave-taking, September 21. We may replace our usual prayers at meals with the Troparion (before) and the Kontakion (after), and use them in our daily prayers as well. All

the faithful should participate in the services celebrating this Great Feast of the Church.

**Troparion tone 1**

O Lord, save Thy people / and bless Thine inheritance. / Grant victory to Orthodox Christians / over the enemy; / and by Thy Cross / preserve Thine estate.

**Kontakion, tone 4**

As Thou wast voluntarily crucified for our sake, O Christ God, / so grant mercy to those who are called by Thy name; / make all Orthodox Christians glad by Thy power, / granting them victories over the enemy, / by bestowing on them the invincible trophy, Thy weapon of peace.

**The Importance of Confession, III**

*Elder Cleopa of Romania (+1998)*

"I would like to tell you briefly about the four steps of a good and pure confession.

"Our all-gracious God has established the sacrament of confession/repentance, for without this no one could be saved after baptism. Whoever makes a pure and complete confession manages to go through a 'second baptism' as you can tell from one of the prayers which says, 'You have been baptized with the second baptism, according to the order of the Christian mysteries.'

"The mystery of Confession, or repentance, is one of the universally recognized seven sacraments and consists of four states:

"The first is heartfelt sorrow for the sins committed. It is necessary to lament and weep for the sins that you have committed which are contrary to the ways of God.

"The second is to confess these sins clearly before the priest.

"The third is to fulfill the penance [*epitimia*] which the priest who heard your confession will impose on you. This may often be necessary fulfill before the prayer of absolution is read.

"The fourth part, the key to holy confession, is the absolution of sins through the priest laying his hands upon the head of the penitent and reading the prescribed prayer. This, according to Canon 8 of the First Ecumenical Council, is called the 'spiritual epiclesis,' in other words, the descent of the holy Spirit upon the head of the one who has confessed without hiding or covering up his sins. The mystery of holy confession cannot be completed until the priest places his hand upon the head of the one who has confessed, just as it is necessary for the bishop to place his hand upon the head of the deacon or priest when he is ordained, or order for the Holy Spirit to descend through apostolic succession. The same is true in this case: the Holy Spirit comes through the hand of the priest and absolves the soul of the one who has confessed.

"Confession, being a laver or a spiritual baptism of the soul after the original baptism, is a mystery through which the sins of man are absolved by the priest, and thus it is advisable that we seek refuge in this sacrament as often as possible. . . .

"I want to speak not only about Confession, as such, but about the benefits of *frequent* confession. There are specifically five benefits of frequent confession.

"The first benefit of frequent confession is that sin does not have time to put down roots in us, and thus the nest which the devil seeks to weave in us is destroyed.

"The devil, seeing that you confess often, that you repent, pray, and disclose his wiles, says, 'It is useless for me to work on him since he is constantly going to the priest and confessing, receiving absolution, and thus I gain nothing. It is better for me to go to those who are lazy spiritually, who don't care about their salvation, who confess rarely, if at all, because those do not work against me as this one does!' When someone confesses often, he is more aware of his sins and does not become careless about them. When he has not confessed for a few days, he says, 'What have I been doing!' Immediately he remembers. But when he lets a month or two, or maybe a year go by, how can he remember all his sins? . . . .

"Remember that through frequent confession, sin does not take root in the soul of the one who confesses.

"The second benefit of frequent confession is that man easily remembers the sins which he was committed since his last confession. Someone who confesses infrequently has trouble remembering everything he has done. Because of this, many of the sins that he has committed remain unconfessed, and, as such, unforgiven. The devil then reminds this person of those sins right at the hour of death, and what good is this, for most often the person cannot speak at that time and is unable to confess!

"Woe to the person who goes to confession and confesses only a part of a particular sin, but does not confess fully, or who confesses the sin, but not in the manner in which it was committed! He is try to cover things up in one way or another, thinking that he can lie to God, that God does not know how he committed such and such a sin, or in what manner! He thinks that he has to lay before the spiritual father a few sins, and if he receives absolution, then he is forgiven!

"The priest absolves only that which he hears; the other sins remain bound to the person, for he was not sincere and will find no other recourse to be relieved of this burden than through sincere confession. So, we see here that an other prerequisite for someone to make a thorough confession is that is must be sincere and pure. Everything that comes into the mind must be told, for he is not telling the priest [but God]. The priest is a man of clay, just like you and I. He has received the power to bind and loose sins through the working of the Holy Spirit.

"The third benefit of frequent confession is that, even if someone has fallen into a sin that leads to death, if he immediately flees and confesses this sin, he enters into the grace of God. His conscience is not weighted down under the heaviness of the sin, for it is cleansed through an immediate confession.

"The fourth benefit of frequent confession is that when death approaches a person who confesses often, it finds him pure and in the grace of God, thus having great hope for salvation.

"According to St. Basil the Great, the devil is never absent from the death of the righteous and the sinners, seeking to find man in a state of sin so that he can claim that soul. He can find nothing in those who confess often and completely, because they have repented and received absolution for their sins.

"The fifth benefit of frequent confession is that such a person stops himself and keeps himself from sin, for he is reminded that after just a few days he will have to confess again and will receive a penance from his spiritual father to counteract those sins that he has committed.

When someone confesses often, all he has to do is remember his shame before his spiritual father and the penance that he will surely be given, and he will do all he can to keep himself from sin. Man has so much strength to use *against* sin; even if all the devils from hell were to come, they would be powerless to do anything to him if he would just oppose sin. This strength to overcome the temptations of the devils is given to each of us by God at the time of our baptism. If man did not have this strength to oppose sin, then hell would not exist to punish sin. Don't you know that the Holy Spirit says through the Psalms, *Lord, Thou hast crowned us with the shield of free will.* And again, Solomon says, *God has created man and left him to his own devices.*

"If someone wants to sin, he sins; if he does not want to sin, he doesn't. The devil only puts the ideas in our minds, so if someone is foolish and deceived, he commits the sin. Can you say on the day of judgment, 'Lord, the devil took me into the bar, the devil made me sin with such and such a woman, the devil made me steal, the devil made me a drunkard, the devil made me have an abortion, etc.'? If so, then the devil will say, 'Lord, show me a witness who saw me drag this person into the bar, or into the fornication, or murder!'

"Then that same devil will turn to the man and say, 'See how foolish you are? I only suggested these sins to you. But since you are a fool, you gave yourself over to them on your own. I did not drag you! But since you listened to me, now you are mine!'

"However, through frequent confession, this devil's nest is destroyed. . . .

"So the fifth benefit of confession is dual in nature: first of all, it destroys Satan's nest within the soul, and secondly, death does not find such a soul unconfessed.

"Anyone who takes on the practice of confessing often does not allow the rust of sin to settle on his

mind and heart. Someone who weeds his field often can readily tell when sin entangles him, and he immediately pulls it out of his soul through confession. This person will not be taken by death unprepared. . . .

"Don't even begin to think that small sins are not serious! These need to be confessed as much as the greater ones, for the Gospel tells us that nothing impure will enter into the kingdom of heaven."

### Reflection from the Prologue

*St. Nikolai of Zicha*

Learn to respect and love lowly and simple people. Such are the most blessed on earth, and such are the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. In them there is no pride—indeed, pride is the prevalent madness afflicting the rich and powerful of this world. The lowly carry out their duty in this world perfectly; and yet, when someone praises them for it, it seems unearned to them—while the self-seeking men of the world seek praise for all their work, and often it is imperfectly done.

St. Alexander the charcoal-burner (Aug 12) was an eminent philosopher, yet he left everything, hid himself from exalted society and the praise of the world, and mingled with the lowliest and the simplest of men—a charcoal-burner among charcoal-burners. Instead of yearning for his erstwhile praise and honors, he rejoiced that children ran after him, laughing at him because of his sooty skin and ragged clothes. Even so, Alexander was not the only who desired to live with the lowly and simple. Many kings and princes, learning of the sweetness of the Christian Faith, have removed the crowns from their heads and fled from aristocratic vanity, to be among simple people. Did not the Lord Christ Himself, the King of Kings, appear among shepherds and fishermen? St. Zeno counsels: "Do not choose a glorious place for living, and do not associate with men of prominence."

### On Idle Curiosity

We all know the saying "Curiosity killed the cat." The cat, viewed as a curious creature readily poking its nose into everything, in this case did so to its hurt. We say this when our curiosity about things that are not truly our concern gets us into trouble of one sort or another.

In his book *Path of Salvation*, St. Theophan the Recluse defines 'curiosity' as "an irresistible inclination to see and hear without purpose". It "consists of trying to know everything without order, without aim, without distinguishing whether it is needful or not" (pp. 54-55).

The desire to know and understand God and His world is a gift from God. It helps us to live and learn in our world. We might call this a natural or healthy curiosity. Without such curiosity or desire to know, there would be little innovation, little advance of knowledge. Asking why things are this way and how they work and then investigating guided by such

questions leads to much knowledge useful for living in this world and attaining to God.

The curiosity that kills the cat and that of which St. Theophan writes might be termed "idle curiosity" to distinguish it from curiosity purposefully directed towards an end. "Idle curiosity" seeks to see and hear and know things without aim, without purpose, without need. It pokes its nose unabashedly into the business of others. The fading tabloids and the internet replacing them are full of material that panders to our idle curiosity. Much of the news consists of this sort of material as well. The internet and its search engines make indulging in idle curiosity easier than it has ever been.

Idle curiosity will inevitably get us, like the cat, into trouble. Curiosity properly used will bring us to knowledge of God.  
*Fr. Justin Frederick*

### **"Perverse Thoughts Separate Men from God" Part One**

*From Elder Paisios in "Elder Paisios of the Holy Mt."*

Elder Paisios always urged us to think positively. Our positive thinking, however, should not be our ultimate aim; eventually our soul must be cleansed from our positive thoughts as well, and be left bare having as its sole vestment divine grace granted to us through Holy Baptism. "This is our aim," he used to say, "to totally submit our mind to the grace of God. The rest is taken care of by His grace.

In the beginning, we should willingly try to develop positive thoughts, which will gradually lead us to the perfect good, God, to whom belongs every glory, honor, and worship; on the contrary, to us belongs only the humility of our conceited attitude.

"We must always be careful and constantly question the nature of our thoughts. When someone is preoccupied and trusts his own way of thinking, he becomes vulnerable to the devil, who is capable of transforming us into sly persons, even when we are honest by nature.

The older fathers never trusted their own thoughts. Even for minor problems to which they had to give answers, they prayed to God, or fasted, as a way to "force" divine grace to reveal the answer according to God's will; and after they got the "information," they gave the answer.

In our days, when someone has a serious problem and asks for advice, we tend to interrupt him and provide an answer without letting him finish his question first. In this case, we do not only not seek the assistance of divine grace, but we also misuse our logic, which was granted to us by God. We are ruled by our own thoughts and unhesitatingly rely on them, very often having to face the disastrous results of our acts.

We must have positive thoughts, otherwise none of the spiritual fathers—not even the saints—can help us. When Jesus was on the Cross and all the terrible events were taking place, two thieves were also being crucified with Him. "And when the sixth hour had

come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour." "...And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs, they went into the holy city and appeared to many." Each one of them had a different attitude towards Him, even though they were both placed next to the same God; a God who had never been blamed for, or accused by anyone for the slightest sin. On the contrary, many people were benefited by Him: some had been cured of a specific disease, others had been resurrected, and all these miracles took place in public. Now, even nature was reacting against the injustice done to Him.

The thief placed on the left cross had created inside his mind a "factory," which produced only negative thoughts. "...One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.'" Although he could see what was going on around him, he never questioned himself about it. The one on the right, who had a positive way of thinking, reacted as follows: "But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he say, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'."

Both thieves had the same almighty God placed between them who could help them. The negative thinking of the one on the left prevented God from helping him, whereas the one on the right—who had committed terrible crimes and was legitimately being punished—was able to "move" Jesus with his positive attitude. And He said to him: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

We should keep in mind that God "cannot" help us, even if He really wants to, unless we acquire a positive way of thinking.

Concerning the spiritual progress of a disciple monk, it is more important for him to develop good thoughts that to be guided by a spiritual father who is considered a living saint...*To be continued... Next week: The 'thought-producing machine.*

### **Upcoming Events 2023**

24 September: Annual Meeting  
15 October: 2:00 p.m. Oktoberfest  
12 November: Parish Thanksgiving Dinner

**GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!**