

# The Confessor's Tongue for February 18, 2024

37<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Zacchaeus; St. Leo the Great of Rome

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.

## What Is Secularism?

At our Diocesan Assembly in 2004, Archbishop Dmitri of blessed memory spoke about our task of proclaiming Jesus Christ in an evil time based on the Gospel reading of the day: "For this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Indeed, the Church has always labored in evil times, but now in our so-called "Post-Christian era", our task is even more difficult. Secularism is rampant, threatening to uproot living faith from the hearts of men. His Eminence defined "secularism" in a most perceptive way: "the treating of this world as an end in itself." To counteract it, we must deepen our faith and our bond of love with one another.

What does it mean to treat the world as an end in itself? It means essentially that we allow our goals, our vision, our aspirations to be limited to this life. We may believe in God and go to church, but the focus of our life is getting education, getting a good job, buying a house, getting better cars, enjoying good food, having fun, having pleasure in relationships, seeing the next movie, getting the next video game, storing up funds for retirement, etc. Our thinking about things is defined by the conventional wisdom we acquire in school and in the media (if it can truly be called wisdom at all).

"Treating the world as an end in itself" is what we do when we live to eat rather than eating to live. We can make a god of food and the pleasure we derive from eating, and many do. "Treating the world as an end in itself" is what we do when we center our lives around pleasure, whether it be sex, entertainment, food, power to control others, or the acquisition of 'stuff.' St. Paul describes this as "worshipping the creature rather than the Creator."

If God is a part of this secular world view, it is merely as an addition to somehow make it better, to enrich life. Christian faith is an ingredient to add to life to make better marriages, better children, better luck, and divine protection and blessing on the lives that we create for ourselves as we seek fulfillment in this world. Many seek to use God in this way, but this is not the life Christ came to give us.

In contrast with a secular outlook that treats the world as an end in itself, the Orthodox Christian clearly sees Christ and His Kingdom as his true end, and this world and all it contains at best as a means to that end and at worst a deadly obstacle.

To overcome our attachment to the world as an end in itself, Christ commands us to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness; He promises that if we do this, He will give us all the things we need to sustain our lives in this world that most people spend their whole lives and energy pursuing.

To overcome secularism, we are called to live in the Church, to live pious 'churchly' lives; the Russians

use the term *tserkovny* to describe this, but the English 'churchly' doesn't quite have the same full, positive connotation. To be *tserkovny* means that we let the Church, where we participate in the Kingdom of God already, be the center of our lives. We live from Pascha to Pascha, from Sunday to Sunday; we always consider the Church calendar when planning vacations and activities. We delight to come to the house of the Lord to present ourselves before Him and sing His praises.

To overcome secularism, we are called to fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. Fasting teaches us that man does not live by physical bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. It frees us from making a god of our stomach and from living to eat. It restores to us a proper relationship with food which man misused when he fell. It helps provide the means by which all of us may give alms. Thus it frees us from the notion that material things alone suffice to satisfy our deep hunger.

Almsgiving helps fulfill the command of Christ to love one another as He has loved us. Love requires practical action to meet the needs of those God puts in our lives. Love will not allow a brother to go hungry, or thirsty, or unsheltered or unclothed. The practice of almsgiving effectively limits our over-consumption that so often leads to enslaving debt. Recognizing our obligation to our brother, we will choose not to live extravagantly or carelessly.

Fasting and Almsgiving work to make our prayer more effective. Prayer to the living God in the name of Jesus Christ is an action by which we demonstrate daily that we do not believe that this world is our end. By it we look beyond the creation to the Creator who made us for Himself. Our effective prayer unites us with God, our true end.

If we are to be Christians, if we are to be true disciples of Christ, we cannot allow ourselves to treat this world as an end in itself, even if everyone else around us seems to be doing so. As we continue to celebrate the saving Pascha of Christ with joy, may we continue to work with him effectively to uproot the secularism in ourselves and gives ourselves more fully to Him, our true God. *Fr. Justin*

## "Love Thinketh No Evil"

*St. John of Kronstadt*

"Charity thinketh no evil." To think evil is the work of the Devil: it is the Devil in the man who makes him think evil. Therefore, do not have any ill-feeling in your heart against your friend, and do not think evil, lest you become united to the Devil. "Overcome evil with good"—that is, the evil which you see or suspect. Your spiritual wisdom and your exploit of Christian love consist in this. (p. 122)

### Why People Fall Away from Christ

Three times, the New Testament mentions a Christian named Demas. Demas was a fellow-worker with Paul, Luke, and others. Paul conveys greetings from him along with Luke to the Colossians at the end of his epistle to them. At the end of Philemon, he mentions Demas as a fellow-laborer who sends greetings to Philemon. But later, at the end of Second Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to come to see him soon, for all his coworkers except Luke have gone to other places and Demas has abandoned Paul. Paul gives the reason for the abandonment: Demas loved the present world and went to the city of Thessalonica to realize that love. Demas's loving the present world rather than the world to come led him to leave Paul and seek his own pleasure elsewhere.

Given this tragic case, we may better appreciate the words of St. John the Theologian: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."

The world the Christian is not to love is not the creation of God with all its beauty, but the things John lists: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, the pride of life. These things constitute the fallen order of human life, driving it and explaining fallen human action. To love these things—the body and what makes it feel good, material goods, money, and the power money brings, the vainglory that says "look and me" and the pride that declares "I am better than you" and despises others—to pursue these things is not to love God, for these things are not of God but are a corruption of the man He made in His image.

Demas's love for the world and the "goods" it offered led him to leave the narrow way, betray Christ, and abandon the Apostle Paul to go to a place where he could live in self-indulgence. His case is tragic, but it mirrors what happens to many who undertake to follow Christ but give up. St. Nikolai of Zicha offers two reasons for Christians falling away: inadequate knowledge of the Faith and sin, i.e., love for the world. Often, these two causes work together. Given Demas's position as a co-worker with Paul, it seems unlikely that he had a poor knowledge of the Faith, which leaves his falling away attributable to the reason Paul gives: he loved the world, or, as St. Nikolai expresses it—sin.

The Great Fast now drawing nigh is given to us to examine ourselves: do we love this present world, or do we love God? If we find ourselves possessed with love for the world, the Fast gives us occasion to confess our sin, repent, and seek to grow in love for God. May none of us be found in the number of those who fall away due to poor knowledge of the faith or to love of the world and the sin that entails. *Fr. Justin*

### About Sloth in Prayer

*St. John of Kronstadt*

It is said that we soon grow weary of praying. Wherefore? Because we do not vividly represent to ourselves the Lord, Who is at our right hand. Look upon Him unceasingly with the eyes of your heart, and then, even if you stand praying all night, you will not grow weary. What do I say—all night? You will be able to stand thus praying two and three nights without growing weary. Remember the Stylites. They stood for many years in a prayerful disposition of soul in pillars or columns, and mastered their flesh, which was the same as yours, and which was also inclined to slothfulness. And you feel oppressed by public prayers of a few hours, even by one hour's prayers! (p. 121-2)

### Why Are We Unhappy?

*St. John of Kronstadt*

All my happiness and unhappiness are contained in the thoughts and inclinations of my heart. If the thoughts and inclinations of my heart are in accord with God's truth or with the will of my God, then I am at rest, filled with divine light, joy, and blessedness; if not, I am uneasy, filled with spiritual, soul-corrupting darkness, heaviness, and despondency. If I completely change the false, impious thoughts and inclinations of my heart into true ones, pleasing to God, then I again obtain rest and blessedness. (*My Life in Christ*, p. 118)

### Seeking the Lord

The Lord said to Israel, "If thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Deut. 4:29). Many people who seek the Lord do not find Him, because they seek half-heartedly. Zacchaeus was one who sought the Lord with all his heart, and he found Him—or the Lord found him. Zacchaeus obtained what he desired and more by his diligent pursuit.

Zacchaeus sets us an example for how to use the Great Fast now drawing near. He pursued Jesus. He insisted on seeing Him despite the obstacles. Christ saw His desire and effort and rewarded him with His presence. The Lord will delight to do as much or more for us if we will set our hearts to seek him with persistence, with all our heart, during Great Lent.

### Upcoming Events 2023

1 March: Parish Dinner/Dance Fundraiser, 6:30  
17 March: Forgiveness Sunday  
18-23 March: Clean Week  
6 May: Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!