

The Confessor's Tongue for April 21, 2024

Fifth Sunday of Lent: St. Mary of Egypt

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.

The Sixth Week: Lazarus

The sixth week of the fast, we follow Lazarus to his grave and watch Christ come to raise him. We shall trace this in hymns taken from Vespers, which begins the liturgical celebration of the next calendar day.

Similar hymns and themes are found in the hymns for Matins. Our liturgical tradition is a rich, extended commentary and reflection upon Holy Scripture and its meaning and teaches the Christian faith to all who will hear it. Hence, we do well to ponder the hymns.

On Monday evening, we sing of the reason for his death, that God might be glorified and demonstrate his coming victor over death:

O Lord, while dwelling in the flesh on the other side of Jordan, Thou hast foretold that the sickness of Lazarus would not end in death, but that it had come to pass for Thy glory, O our God. Glory to Thy mighty acts and Thine all-sovereign power, for Thou hast destroyed death in Thy great mercy and Thy love for mankind.

On Tuesday, we find that Jesus' friend has died, bringing sorrow to Lazarus's friends. Again we meditate on it has a harbinger of a great victory.

Today Lazarus hath died and Bethany lamenteth for him: but Thou, our Savior, shalt awake him from the dead. Through the raising of Thy friend, Thou hast given us in advance an assurance of Thine own dread Resurrection, of hell's death, and Adam's restoration to life; and we therefore sing Thy praises.

On Wednesday, we sing three hymns about Lazarus. Now the disciples learn of their friend's death. "When Thou wast journeying in the flesh, O Jesus, on the other side of the Jordan, Thou hast said to Thy companions: 'My friend Lazarus is already dead, and now hath been committed to the tomb.'" We are given to understand this in a spiritual way applying to ourselves: "Let us follow the example of Mary and Martha, and as intercessors let us send to the Lord our acts of righteousness, that He may come to raise up from the dead our spiritual understanding, which lieth insensible within the tomb of negligence, lacking all feeling of the fear of God and having no vital energy." We also consider Lazarus's own experience in Hades:

Lazarus hath now been two days in the tomb, and he seeth the dead from all the ages. There he beholdeth strange sights of terror, the prisoners of hell, a multitude that none can number. His sisters bitterly lament, looking upon his tomb. But Christ cometh to bring His friend to life, that a single hymn of praise may be offered up with one accord by all: Blessed art Thou, O Savior, have mercy on us.

Through this, we are given to understand that every soul before Christ's death descended to Hades, or Hell, the place of departed souls under Satan's dominion, and were prisoners there.

On Thursday, the hymns look forward to the Entrance of the Lord into Jerusalem as king with reference to Lazarus:

Receive thy King, O Zion. For see, He cometh to thee now in meekness, to raise up Lazarus and to destroy

the bitter kingdom of death. Summoned by God, let all the multitude of holy monks and lay-people assemble, to welcome Christ with palms and cry: Blessed is He who cometh to save mortal men through the Passion of the Cross, and to grant in His love freedom from the passions unto all

On Friday, we mark the last of the forty days of the fast and come to Lazarus's tomb and sing several hymns celebrating Christ's raising of His friend and its meaning for us. "O Lord, Thy voice destroyed the dominion of hell, and the word of Thy power raised from the tomb him that had been four days dead; and Lazarus became the saving first-fruits of the regeneration of the world." Again, "O Lord, wishing to give Thy disciples an assurance of Thy Resurrection from the dead, Thou hast come to the tomb of Lazarus and called to him by name. Then was hell despoiled, and it released the one that had been four days dead..." We glorify Christ for this work of mercy and power.

O Lord, Thou hast come to the tomb of one that was four days dead, to the burial place of Lazarus, and weeping for Thy friend, O Wheat of life, Thou hast raised up the four-day corpse. So death was bound by Thy voice, and the grave-clothes were loosed by Thy hands. Then the band of Thy disciples was filled with joy, and they all raised one voice in adoration, saying: "Blessed art Thou, O Savior, have mercy on us."

The last hymn on Friday night sums up well now where we are in the liturgical year and in the Gospel, and speaks of what it to come.

Having completed the forty days that bring profit to our soul, let us cry: "Rejoice, city of Bethany, home of Lazarus. 'Rejoice, Martha and Mary, his sisters.'" Tomorrow Christ will come, by His word to bring your dead brother to life. Hearing His voice, bitter hell that is never satisfied will tremble and groan aloud, and it will release Lazarus bound in his grave-clothes. Amazed by this miracle, a multitude of Jews will come to meet Him with palms and branches; though their fathers look on Him with malicious envy, yet shall the children praise Him, saying: "Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord, the King of Israel."

Never Lose Hope in Your Salvation

Saint Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium

Saint Amphilochius of Iconium was a first cousin to St Gregory the Theologian, and a close friend of St Basil the Great.

A certain brother, overcome by the passion of wantonness, sinned every day. However, each time, with tears and prayers, he would fall before the Master and Lord and receive forgiveness from Him. And as soon as he had repented, the next day, being misled again by shameful habit, he would fall to sin.

Afterwards, having sinned, he would go to the Church, where he would prostrate himself before the honorable and revered Icon of our Lord Jesus Christ and tearfully confess to Jesus: "Lord, have mercy upon me and take away from me this fearful temptation, for it troubles me fiercely and wounds me with the bitter taste

of the pleasures. I, my Master, cleanse my person once more, that I may gaze upon Thine Icon and see Thy holy form and the sight of Thy face, brighter than the sun, that my heart might be sweetened and thankful.”

And though his lips had just whispered these words, no sooner would he leave the Church than he would fall once again to sin.

Despite this, however, he did not despair of his salvation, but, returning from his sinful deed, would cry out in the Church the same words to God – to the Lord, who loves mankind – adding the following: “My Lord, I swear to Thee on my word that I shall no longer commit this sin. Only forgive me, Good and Most Merciful Lord, whatever sins I have committed, from the beginning to this moment.”

No sooner would he utter these awe-inspiring words, than he would find himself the captive of this evil sin. Let no one cease to marvel at the sweet love of God towards mankind and at His boundless goodness, with which He each day tolerated the uncorrected and evil transgression and ingratitude of the brother. Indeed, God, because of the greatness of His mercy, persistently accepted the repentance of that sinful brother and his inevitable return. For this happened not for one or two or three years, but for more than ten years.

Do you see, my brother, the measureless forbearance and boundless love of the Master? How He continually endures, showing to us kindness, tolerating our terrible transgressions and sins? And what evokes astonishment and wonderment with regard to the rich mercies of God is that He did not become wrathful with the brother in question, though the brother, agreeing not to fall to sin again, continually broke his word.

At any rate, one day when all that we have described again occurred, the brother, having fallen to sin, rushed to the Church, lamenting, groaning, and crying with anguish, to invoke the mercy of God, that He might have compassion on him and take him from the sin of immorality.

No sooner had he called on God, the Lover of man, than the Devil, that evil of old and destroyer of souls, seeing that he could gain nothing, since whatever he accomplished by sin, the brother expunged by his repentance, became infuriated and appeared visibly before the brother. Facing the Icon of Christ, the Devil said to our compassionate Savior: “What will become of the two of us, Jesus Christ? Your sympathy for this sinner defeats me and takes the ground I have gained, since You keep accepting this dissolute man and prodigal, who daily mocks You and scorns Your authority. Indeed, why is it that You do not burn him up, but rather, tolerate and put up with him? Is it because one day You intend to condemn all of the adulterers and the dissolute, and You will destroy all sinners?”

“Actually, You are not a just Judge. But by him Your power is sometimes applied leniently and overlooks things. So, while I was cast from the heavens down to the abyss for a little breach of pride, to this fellow here, even though an immoral man and a prodigal, You calmly show Your sympathy, just because he throws himself down in front of Your Icon.

“In what way can You be called a just Judge, then? But, as I see it, You receive individual people with great kindness, but ignore justice in general.”

The Devil said all of this, poisoned with great bitterness, whilst there poured forth from his nostrils a black flame.

Having said these things, he fell silent. A voice was heard in response, coming forth from the Divine sanctuary, saying the following:

“O all-cunning and ruinous dragon, are you yet not satisfied with your evil and destructive desire to gobble up the world? Now you have even the nerve to try to do away with this man, who has come with contrition to entreat the mercy of My compassion – to devour him, too? Can you offer up enough sins that, by them, you can tilt the balance of justice against the precious blood which I shed on the Cross for this man? Behold My murder and death, which I endured for the forgiveness of his sins.

From the Triodion

As we begin with eagerness, O ye faithful, the sixth week of the holy Fast, let us sing a hymn in preparation for the Feast of Palms, to the Lord who cometh with glory to Jerusalem in the power of the Godhead, that he may slay death. So with reverence let us prepare the branches of the virtues, as emblems of victory; and let us cry Hosanna to the Creator of all. *Sunday Vespers starting the 6th Week*

“You, when he turns again to sin, do not turn him away, but receive him with joy, neither chastising him nor preventing him from committing sin, out of the hope that you might win him over. Yet, I, Who am merciful and love mankind, Who counselled My laudable Apostle Peter, to forgive sins seven times seventy (Matt. 18:22), do I not show him mercy and compassion? Indeed – simply because he flees to Me – I will not turn him away until I have won him over. Furthermore, I was crucified for sinners and for their salvation; My immaculate hands were nailed to the Cross, that those who so wish might take refuge in Me and be saved. For this reason, then, I neither turn away nor reject anyone, even if he should fall many times a day and many times return to Me; such a person will not leave My Temple saddened, for I came not to call the righteous, but to call sinners to repent.”

During the time that this voice was heard, the Devil was fixed in his place, trembling and unable to run away. The voice then again began to say: “We have heard from all that you say, O Seducer, that I am not just; to the contrary, I am just beyond all. In whatever moral state I find a person, in that state I judge him. Look at this man, who a few moments ago repented, having returned from sin and having fallen at My feet with a sincere resolution to abandon sin, and thereby having conquered you.

“Therefore, I will accept him immediately and save his soul, since he did not lose hope in his hard toil for salvation.

“Look how much he merits by his repentance before Me, for which he is honored. As for you, let your hatred be shred to pieces and you disgraced.” While this was being said, the repentant brother had thrown himself before the Icon of the Savior. With his face to the

ground and lamenting, he surrendered his spirit to the Lord. At the same time that the repentant brother departed to the Lord, a great tempest fell upon Satan, like a fire from Heaven, and devoured him. From this incident, my brothers, let us learn of the limitless compassion of God and of His love of man – what a good Master we have! – that we might never again be disheartened by our sins, but rather look after our salvation with zeal. *From the Evergetinos, vol. I.*

What Does *Podvig* Mean?

Any Orthodox Christian who does even the least bit of spiritual reading will come across the word “*podvig*.” While this word can be described, it cannot be translated into one single English word—which is why we continue to use, and must therefore learn to understand, this Russian term.

The word itself has been defined as “spiritual struggle”. Like so many things in Orthodoxy, in doing it, we understand it within our souls even if we cannot explain it. In performing a *podvig*, we find it as a means of drawing nearer to Christ as we travel along the path of salvation.

We bear the scars of sin in our bodies which drags us down to the earth like a magnet, yet our soul longs to ascend to the heights. As man, composed of body and soul, we find the two opposing each other. Even St. Paul says *I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate.... for though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want.*

As Orthodox Christians, we know that we must labor toward purification, illumination, theosis (deification). The first step of purifying ourselves from the passions, from all which draws us away from God and shackles us from ascending to the heights, employs the use of *podvig*.

St. Theophan the Recluse defines our entire Christian life as *podvig*. He explains that the spirit hates sin, while the flesh dwells in it. How is this battle within ourselves to be resolved? Through *podvig*, that spiritual struggle of bringing the soul into mastery over the body.

The Church gives us the directions for doing this through fasting, prostrations, standing in prayer, etc. All of these things oppose the body, and as we fulfill these ascetical practices, we do indeed find that they help us draw nearer to our Creator and Savior. As we aspire to deepen our souls in Christ we find that we want to do more, to go beyond what the Church has already told us are the necessary first steps.

Podvig is precisely that “doing more”.

According to St Theophan “all the saints accept the only true path to virtue to be pain and hard work... lightness and ease are a sign of a false path. Anyone who is not struggling, not in *podvig*, is in prelest” (spiritual delusion) (*The Path to Salvation*, pg 209).

Our Lord said, *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me* (Matt. 16:24). St Innocent, in his book, *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven*, writes clearly that the way which leads to the kingdom of Heaven is precisely to deny

oneself, take up the cross, and follow Christ. Our beloved American saint goes on to explain that “to deny oneself means to give up one’s bad habits, to root out of the heart all that ties us to the world...there are external and internal crosses. To take up one’s cross means not only to bear crosses laid on us by others or sent by Providence, but ...*even to lay crosses upon oneself and bear them.*”

This is a clear direction to *podvig*.

When we take up an additional cross, a *podvig*, with the blessing of our spiritual father, we find that the Lord Himself comes and helps us to carry that cross, walking side by side with us. Isn’t this what we long for? To have the Lord near, to be close to Him?

All of *podvig* is a form of repentance, of turning around and getting back unto the correct path. Because it is so intricately linked to repentance, no one should ever undertake a specific *podvig* without the approval of his father confessor/spiritual father. The evil one is very crafty and he wants nothing more than to drag us into the same pride through which he fell. He will try to use the very means with which we are trying to overcome our sins to lead us into the sin of pride. Yes, we can become prideful and vain glorious over our own *podvig*! In fact, it frequently happens that an astute spiritual guide will tell his spiritual child to abandon his *podvig*.

When we take on a *podvig* it is for the sake of opposing the body which draws us down to the earth and away from God. Do I eat too much? Then I must take a *podvig* of additional fasting or denying myself the special foods in which I tend to indulge Am I lazy? Then I need to work harder. Do I not want to get out of bed in the morning? Then get up earlier to pray. The list goes on and each person, with the help of his father confessor, knows which vices particularly afflict him. Every vice has an opposing virtue and in striving toward that virtue, the vice can, with the help of God (for nothing can be accomplished without prayer and grace from the Lord!), be overcome, or at least lessened to a great degree.

Any *podvig* can be for the sake of opposing a passion with which we are afflicted, as stated above, but we can also take on a *podvig* as a form of prayer for ourselves, our families or any other person. An example of this could be the parent who has a sick child. In addition to praying for that child, the parent can take on a *podvig* of additional prostrations and/or fasting as an extra effort with that prayer.

Indeed, we not only can, but should, add a *podvig* to our prayers of petition to the Lord.

Throughout the centuries we can see in the history of the Christian Church that living the life of a Christian meant *podvig*. The early centuries saw hundreds of thousands of martyrs, many known to us by name, but the majority of them unknown. In the more recent history we have witnessed decades of communist oppression which produced thousands of martyrs and confessors for the faith—those individuals who refused to deny Christ and suffered beyond description. Being a Christian meant *podvig*. It has also been clear throughout the ages that when Christians became lax, when externals were emphasized and not the interior life, when abuses and corruption crept into the Church, *podvig* came from outside in the form of Islamic or

communist persecution. Both individually and collectively, we must realize that if we do not accept and seek *podvig* ourselves, it will be imposed upon us!

While most of the faithful accept and observe the fasting days and seasons—and recognize the spiritual benefits from them—we have lost the concept of taking any other additional fasting upon ourselves as a form of *podvig*. While we give willingly and cheerfully to the poor and to the Church, it is rarely to the point of denying ourselves of any necessities from those resources. We accept our daily prayer rule, but where are the prostrations outside of Great Lent?

All of the things listed above (and there are indeed many, many more, depending on the individual) can be a form of *podvig*.

The Christian life in this fallen world is a struggle. If we are not struggling, then are we on the right path? When all is going well, we tend to let our focus stray away from God, while in hardship we seek Him. We should always remember that Adam was in paradise where he lacked for nothing, but it was there that he lost that perfect communion with God. When did he find Him again? When the Lord descended into Hades, grasped his hand and delivered him and all those who had been held there. http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/theveil_podvig.aspx

What Are *Podvigs* and What Should We Do?

St. Sergius of Kasimov

The time of the fast has come, let's say, Great Lent. For seven weeks, almost fifty days, we may not eat what is non-lenten. The first week, the week of the Cross, and Holy Week are an especially strict fast when even oil is not allowed.

Is this hard? Yes, very, especially at the middle and in the second half of the fast. The flesh shrinks, protests, and demands that we feed it to satiety. But force yourself, take the upper hand over the body, and spend the whole fast as you should. And if you master yourself, then here is your first *podvig*!

Has the time to pray come? Force yourself—and here is a *podvig*!

It is time to go to church, but it is hard to do so. Does one thing or another detain you; does one thing or another draw you away? Take up your arms, leave everything and go—and here is a *podvig*!

In church, are you lacking a desire to pray; is there coldness in your heart? With bows or prostrations, with attentiveness, with effort of will, do your best to overcome this unwillingness—and here is a *podvig*!

Do you hear mocking of faith, gossip, ridiculing, or idle talk? Turn away, avoid it, or at least be silent—and here is a *podvig*!

Are you being forced to get angry, to contradict, or to argue? Yield; keep in check the tumult of your agitated heart—and here is a *podvig*!

Do you have something you cherish, but someone has expressed a desire to have it? Give it away—and here is a *podvig*!

Do you have enemies; are you able to take revenge on them? Stop; don't take revenge, but that is not enough; forgive them; but even that is not enough, rather: do good to them. This is surely a great *podvig*! St. Dimitry of Rostov says, "Whoever forgives his enemies

and prays for them is a wonderworker, a doer of miracles."

Has an opportunity for an unjust or dishonest gain turned up for you? Turn away—and here is a *podvig*!

Is your unruly flesh demanding pleasures that are not permitted by the law of Christ, such as unnecessary fine clothing? Refuse it—and here is a *podvig*!

Is the world calling you out to an amusement, to a game during the fast? Stay home—and here is a *podvig*!

Do you feel like reading a worldly book, listening to or playing music during a fast? Restrain yourself—and here is a *podvig*!

Do you live well in the material sense; do you have everything you need and even extra that you are able to store away? Remember the hungry, the barefoot, and the unclothed; look at life around you carefully and seek them out. Satisfy their needs, and don't sigh and be remorseful about what you give them, but do it with joy—and here is a *podvig*, a brilliant *podvig*. When you give to a person in need, it is actually Christ who is invisibly stretching out His hand and receiving. And incorruptible wealth will be accumulating for you in heaven.

By all means, without fail, adopt this *podvig*, it is obligatory for all Christians. At the Dread Judgment, he who has given alms will hear from the Lord, "Come, ye blessed," but he who has not given will hear, "Depart from me, ye cursed." Do not excuse yourself on the grounds of your own lack of means, but remember the two mites of the widow in the Gospel. The Lord said that she gave more than all the rich.

Do you see those who are unfortunate whom you would like to help, but cannot; is it beyond your strength? Then go down on your knees and pray for them to our Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ, and He will give them help through others, and you will have carried out a *podvig* of love and compassion.

If you see a person who has died, whether you knew him or not, pray for him—and here is a *podvig*! This brings great mercy to the departed one.

In your morning and evening prayers and in church, when you pray for your departed relatives and acquaintances, remember also all of our forefathers, fathers, and brethren, and especially warmly pray for those who have no one to pray for them—and this is a *podvig*! And the Lord will note it, and faithful Christians will pray for you when you yourself will have reposed. Do not pass by a cemetery without praying silently and secretly for all those buried there—this is a *podvig*! Is there noise, hubbub, the restless bustle of life all around, and nowhere to pray? Go within yourself and repeat over and over the prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." And not once, not twice, but ten times, a hundred, a thousand times and more say the prayer—and this is a *podvig*! If you will practice this *podvig*, the Lord will send you constant, contrite, and tearful prayer of the mind and heart. Remember that true prayer is a gift from heaven to the Christian struggler. *From 'A Spiritual Testament'*

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!