

The Confessor's Tongue for August 11, 2024

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; Martyr Euplus

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.

Dormition of the Most-Holy Theotokos

August 15

This feast, celebrated on August 15, is the last Great Feast of the liturgical year, which ends on August 31. The Dormition refers to the "falling asleep" or death of the Theotokos.

According to the ancient tradition of the Church, when it came time for the Theotokos to pass from this life to the Kingdom, an angel appeared to her three days before her death to inform her of this passage. The Virgin made preparations for her death, ascending the Mount of Olives to pray and give thanks to the Lord. Meanwhile, the Holy Apostles were miraculously carried away from where each had been to the house of the Theotokos. There, they prayed with her, and she committed her soul to her Son and God. The Apostles laid her body to rest in a tomb in the valley of Kedron near Gethsemane. By God's providence, Thomas arrived late, on the third day after her death. He was grieved that he had missed Mary's last moments, and so he wanted to see her one last time and venerate her body. The other Apostles took him to the tomb and had it opened. Inside, they discovered her body missing and the empty grave clothes. In this way, they realized she had already partaken of the Resurrection.

The focus of the Dormition Feast is the glorification of the Holy Theotokos in death and her participation in the Christ's Resurrection before the day of the general resurrection. This shows her to have reached man's goal of perfect life in union with God. The feast is also eschatological in that it points to the victory over death that every faithful believer will gain.

In commemorating the Theotokos' repose or death, Dormition is akin to the feast of any other saint. It differs, however, in that it affirms her bodily resurrection and her participation in the life of the age to come. Though affirmed in the hymnology and by many of the Fathers, this belief in Mary's "assumption" is not dogma in the Orthodox Church, though by papal decree in 1950, it is dogma for Roman Catholics.

We celebrate the Dormition for 8 days, from August 15 through the Leave-taking August 23. We add the festal troparion and kontakion to our regular morning and evening prayers, in place of our usual prayers before and after meals, and when setting out to travel.

It is customary to bless herbs and flowers on this feast.

Troparion, tone 1

In giving birth, thou didst preserve thy virginity, / in falling asleep thou didst not forsake the world, O Theotokos. / Thou wast translated to life, O thou who art the Mother of Life, // and by thy prayers thou dost deliver our souls from death.

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Kontakion, tone 2

Neither the tomb nor death could hold the Theotokos, / who is constant in prayer and our firm hope in her intercessions. / For being the Mother of Life, she was translated to life / by the One who dwelt in her virginal womb.

On The Gift of the Enemy

A striking hymn is found in the Octoechos, the "Book of the Eight Tones", from which the Church takes material for her services throughout the year outside of the Great Fast and Paschal Season. The following text is sung at "Lord, I Have Cried" at Friday Vespers in tone 4:

Thou who art compassionate
hast given me the enemy for my profit,
as a gift to scourge and teach me;
for his wickedness serveth as a test,
which, without being good, leadeth me to the good:
therefore it is now in thanksgiving that I cry:
Save me, O Lord, before I perish utterly.

Does anyone think of Satan as a gift given by God for our profit? The Church does. Though his desire is only "to kill, to steal, and to destroy", Christ has bound him, and he now rages at us—but as a pit bull on a leash. Growl and rage and strain against his leash as he may in his desire to bite us, the dog may not harm us unless we walk up to him and put ourselves in range of his teeth. In similar fashion, God uses the enemy's destructive desire to test us, to scourge and correct us when needed, and as a foe for us to wrestle with so that the strength of our faith may be developed in battle.

The Lord as a good, wise father, chastens those whom he loves that they may become legitimate, disciplined, virtuous sons worthy of their father. Chastening is an unpleasant correction given in response to sins we have committed. It is designed to humble us, and to impress an important lesson on our souls, and to discourage us from sinning again. Sin separates us from God, darkens our soul, dulls our spiritual perceptivity, cools our zeal, hardens our heart, and kills the life in us. We cannot want it to have any place in us if we understand our true interests, but, in our weakness, we are easily seduced by it. God in His love uses the devil's desire to do us harm to provide chastening, but, rather than giving him free rein to do what he likes, God limits him. God does not let the diabolical pit bull off his leash, but He may allow him to come close enough to bark in our ear and to bite us if we hold out our hand to pet him. If we do not like this experience of his hateful rage against us, we will stay away from the sin that gives him access to us.

God also uses the enemy to teach us. By fighting against this foe, we learn, often through many failures,

how to resist his lies, identify the provocative thoughts he insinuates in our minds and reject them, and stand firmly against him. Untested faith has no value, but a faith that has been tested and ultimately prevails is of great worth. Thus God uses the devil as a sort of trainer or sparring partner who has limited power to hurt us while training us to use our free will and our spiritual weapons to choose God and what is good and to reject evil.

None of this makes the devil good, though God uses him for good. He remains evil, full of hatred for God and for man made in God's image. Ironically, through Christ's victory over the devil through His death, descent into Hades, and resurrection, the devil has against his will become a means of bringing us into the good things of God.

Hence the Church cries out in thanksgiving, while calling on the Lord to save us before we perish. For ultimately the battle is real and is a matter of life and death. Though the devil is bound, he still can do harm if we give him power in our lives by believing his lies. If we do not repent when we fall, the fruit of those lies is death. So every Christian must recognize his dependence on Christ for victory against the foe.

During the four fasts of the Church year, we consciously enter the arena to do battle against the enemy in the areas of our life in which we have given him influence and access. May God grant us a profitable fast, a good contest, and victory in battle.
Fr. Justin Frederick

Litua Saints: St. Theodora of Sihla

We mention many saints during the Litua and the Prayer "O God, Save Thy People" at Matins, asking their intercessions for us. Here we shall endeavor one by one to acquaint you better with them.

Saint Theodora of Sihla, [feast August 7], who is one of the greatest of Romania's women ascetics, was born in the village of Văntatori in Neamts County in the first half of the seventeenth century, and was one of the two daughters of Stephen Joldea and his wife.

In her youth, Saint Theodora experienced a great trial in her family. Her sister, Marghiolitsa, died in a tragic way. This event deeply affected the saint. At this time, the thought of abandoning the world blossomed in her heart. She wished to do penance for her parents, for her sister, and for herself. Her grieving parents, however, did not agree with her decision, because now Theodora was their only child. They pleaded with her, and, at the proper time, they married her to a young man who was working in their vicinity, and who went frequently to venerate the holy sites. After entering into a lawful marriage, they lived together in her husband's house.

Since Saint Theodora and her husband did not have any children, they both decided to enter monasteries in the Buzau valley. Her husband went to the Skete of Poiana Mărului, where he was tonsured with the name Eleutherios. He was also found worthy of ordination to the holy priesthood. Saint Theodora

also received the monastic tonsure in the Skete of Poiana Mărului. In just a few short years, she advanced in obedience, prayer, and asceticism, acquiring the grace of unceasing prayer of the heart. She also had to endure many temptations from the Enemy.

When the Buzau valley was invaded by the Turks, Saint Theodora fled to the mountains with her Spiritual Mother, Schema-nun Paisia. They lived for several years in fasting, vigil and prayer, enduring cold, hunger, and other trials from the devil. When her Spiritual Mother fell asleep in the Lord (sometime between 1670 - 1675), Saint Theodora was led by God to the mountains of Neamț. After venerating the wonderworking Neamts Icon of the Mother of God (June 26) at the monastery, she was told to seek the advice of Hieromonk Barsanuphios of Sihăstria Skete. Seeing her desire for the eremetical life (life of hermit), and recognizing her great virtues, he gave her Holy Communion and assigned Hieromonk Paul as her Father Confessor and spiritual guide.

Father Barsanuphios advised Mother Theodora to go and live alone in the wilderness for a year. "If, by the grace of Christ, you are able to endure the difficulties and trials of the wilderness, then remain there until you die. If you cannot endure, however, then go to a women's monastery, and struggle there in humility for the salvation of your soul."

Father Paul searched in vain for an abandoned hermitage where the saint might live. Then they met an old hermit living beneath the cliffs of Sihla. This clairvoyant Elder greeted them and said, "Mother Theodora, remain in my cell, because I am moving to another hermitage."

Father Paul left the nun on Mount Sihla, blessing her before he returned to the Sihăstria Skete. Saint Theodora lived in that cell for thirty years, glorifying God. Strengthened with power from on high, she vanquished all the attacks of the Enemy through patience and humility. She never left the mountain, and never saw another person except for Father Paul, who visited her from time to time to bring her the Spotless Mysteries of Christ and the supplies she needed in order to survive.

Saint Theodora made such progress in asceticism that she was able to keep vigil all night long with her arms lifted up toward heaven. When the morning sun touched her face, she would eat some herbs and other vegetation to break her fast. She drank the rain water which she collected from a channel cut into the cliff, which is still known as Saint Theodora's spring. After Father Paul's repose, she remained solely in God's care.

When Turks attacked the villages and monasteries around Neamts, the woods became filled with people from nearby villages and refugees from the monasteries. Some nuns discovered Saint Theodora's cell and she told them, "Remain here in my cell, for I have another place of refuge." Then she moved into a nearby cave, living there completely alone. At night she would rest a little on the

flagstones, which still can be seen to this day. An army of Turks discovered the cave, and were about to kill the saint. Lifting up her hands, she cried out, "O Lord, deliver me from the hands of these murderers." The wall of the cave opened up, and she was able to escape into the woods.

As Saint Theodora grew old, she was completely forgotten and there was no one to care for her. Placing all her hope in God, she continued her spiritual struggles, and reached great heights of perfection. When she prayed her mind was raised up to Heaven, and her body was lifted up off the ground. Like the great saints of earlier times, her face shone with a radiant light, and a flame came forth from her mouth when she prayed.

Eventually her clothes became mere rags, and when her food ran out, she was fed by birds just as the Prophet Elias (July 20) was. The bread that they brought to her came from the Sihăstria Skete. Seeing the birds come to the Skete and then fly away with pieces of bread in their beaks, the Hegumen sent two monks to follow them, thinking that some ascetic was living there and that God was providing food for him. Night fell as they walked toward Sihla, and they lost their way in the woods. They decided to wait for daylight, and so they began to pray. One of them climbed a tree and looked for a place where someone might be living. Suddenly, they saw a bright light rising up into the sky, and went to investigate. As they approached, they saw a woman shining with light and levitating above the ground while she prayed.

Sensing their presence, Saint Theodora said, "Brethren, do not be afraid, for I am a humble handmaiden of Christ. Throw me something to wear, for I am naked." The monks were amazed when she addressed them by name. Then she prayed: "I thank Thee, O Lord, that Thou hast heard me." She said to the monks, "Brothers, I have lived for many years in these parts, and, behold, it has been forty days since I prayed for God to send me a Confessor to come and impart unto me the Holy Mysteries of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it is almost time for me to depart from this life. So, please, go straight to the Skete and ask Father Hegumen to send Father Anthony and Hierodeacon Laurence to me tomorrow morning with Holy Communion."

They asked her how they could find their way to the Skete at night, for they did not know the way. She said that they would be guided to the Skete by a light which would go before them.

The next day at dawn, Father Anthony went to Sihla with the deacon and two other monks. When they found Saint Theodora, she was praying by a fir tree in front of her cave. She made a Confession of her entire life to Father Anthony, and then she received the Holy Mysteries of Christ and gave her soul to God. Her last words were, "Glory to God for all things." The monks buried Saint Theodora in her cave with great reverence sometime during the first decade of the eighteenth century [cir. 1705].

News of her death spread quickly, and people came from all over to venerate her tomb. Her holy relics remained incorrupt, and many miracles took place before them. Some kissed the relics; others touched the reliquary, while others washed in her spring. All who

entreated Saint Theodora's intercession received healing and consolation.

Saint Theodore's former husband, Hieromonk Eleutherios, heard that she had been living at Sihla, and decided to go there. He found her cave shortly after her death and burial. Grieving for his beloved wife, Eleutherios did not return to his monastery, but made a small cell for himself below the cliffs of Sihla. He remained close to her cave, fasting, praying, and serving the Divine Liturgy. He lived there for about ten years before his blessed repose. He was buried in the hermits' cemetery and the Skete of Saint John the Baptist was built over his grave.

Saint Theodora's relics were taken to the Kiev Caves Monastery between 1828 and 1834. There she is known as Saint Theodora of the Carpathians. Our Venerable Mother Theodora was glorified by the Romanian Orthodox Church on June 20, 1992.

The inscription of Saint Theodora's scroll reads: "Life is blessed for those in the wilderness as they fly upon the wings of Divine love" (Sunday Matins, Hymn of Degrees, first Antiphon).

Gladsome Light

The ancient hymn Gladsome light is a distinctive part of the Church's Vespers service (the daily evening corporate prayer of the Church).

The hymn can be difficult to understand clearly, as the first part of the sentence is convoluted in English: "O Gladsome Light of the holy Glory, of the immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed, O Jesus Christ..." Who is the "Gladsome Light" and to whom the adjectives "heavenly, holy, blessed" apply?

In the original inflected languages, which have case endings to show which words go together, the matter is clear. Both "Gladsome Light" and "Jesus Christ" are in the vocative case, the case of direct address, which is often rendered in English by the word "O" before words in the vocative. So we have "O Gladsome Light Jesus Christ" as the One to whom our hymn is addressed.

The words "holy glory" go together also and modify "Gladsome Light." "Glory" is a feminine noun in the genitive case, and "holy" modifies it as the case endings show. The Genitive case indicates possession. So we have "O Gladsome Light of the Holy Glory..."

The words of the rest of our phrase "of the immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed" go together, as all of them are masculine singular genitive adjectives modifying the masculine singular genitive noun "Father". And "Father" being in the genitive, expresses whose is the "holy Glory"—it is the immortal, heavenly, holy, blessed Father's glory.

So let's see what we have: We address the Gladsome Light Jesus Christ. This Light that is Christ is of (or from) the "holy glory of the immortal, heavenly, holy, blessed Father." Indeed, Christ is the Light of the Word, the Radiance and Glory of the Father, or "Light of Light" as we confess in the Creed. Let us look now at the rest of the hymn.

"Having come to sunset and beholding the evening light..." Vespers is the evening prayer of the Church, appointed to be served at sunset. By the time this hymn is sung, it is dark enough that artificial illumination is

required to see. Thus, this is the ancient hymn sung during the lamplighting in the Church. The spiritual significance is clear. Christ is the Light that shines in the darkness of the fallen world. As night falls signifying the fallen world without Christ, the time in which criminals roam and when man is afraid, we look to Christ, the "evening Light."

"We hymn the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit God..." As night falls, we sing the praise of the one true God in three Persons who has revealed Himself to us in Christ. The Church never wearies of glorifying the Holy Trinity.

"Meet it is at all times that Thou be hymned with fitting voices, O Son of God, Thou Giver of Life..." Because of who the Gladsome Light Christ is, it is proper that we sing His praises at all times. And our voices should be befitting His glory: not all words, not all means of singing are worthy of Him, so we seek always in our worship to lift "fitting voices" in praise of Him.

"Wherefore the world doth glorify Thee." It is fitting for the creature to glorify the Creator. Indeed, all of creation honors the Creator by doing what it was created to do—except one creature, man, who has rebelled against his Maker thinking to better his lot thereby. Yet even among fallen men there are those who are learning to practice their true vocation of worship and service to the Creator of all, the true God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Gladsome Light of the Father.

Fr. Justin Frederick

Matins: God is the Lord--The Lord is God

If you have been present at Matins or a Molieben, you are familiar with the exclamation "God is the Lord and hath revealed Himself unto us" (Psalm 117:27) "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Psalm 117:26; Matthew 21:9) and the choir's repeated singing of "God is the Lord". This text in Matins and Moliebens also appears at the Divine Liturgy right before Communion.

Though we long sang "God is the Lord," this is not the best way to translate it. For years the argument has been made by a few that this should be rendered "The Lord is God", but long established practice and lack of official guidance to make a change kept us using what was familiar. In 2018, St. Tikhon's Press with the Metropolitan's blessing published new Priest's Service Books that incorporate this change, and we made the change as well. But in many places, you will still hear "God is the Lord" sung. Let us understand the significance of this.

The three languages from which the Psalm comes down to us use inversion, putting the predicate of the implied verb "is" first and the subject second. The widespread English translation of the verse has followed the word order of the original languages, but clear understanding of the meaning in English requires the word order of the original languages to be reversed.

Understanding the context will make this clear. The whole relevant text from Psalm 117 (118) reads thus: Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the LORD: we have blessed you out of the house of the LORD. God is the LORD..." By modern convention, in the Old

Testament, when the Tetragrammeton, or the four-consonant name of God revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush, YHWH, occurs, it is rendered as "Lord" set in all capitals to distinguish the name of God YHWH from his title "Lord", or Adonai, in Hebrew. The Hebrews did not pronounce the sacred name of God, and no one knows how it was to be pronounced. We do know, that when a Hebrew reader saw YHWH in the text, he read it as "Adonai" to avoid speaking the holy name of God. To distinguish in the Old Testament the use of one of God's titles, "Adonai", or "Lord", from His revealed but unpronounceable name YHWH, the latter is set in all capital letters.

Psalm 117 speaks prophetically of Christ. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of YHWH. YHWH is God and hath revealed himself unto us." The Jews on Palm Sunday cried out "Blessed is he who comes in the name of YHWH" as Jesus entered Jerusalem on the foal of the ass, thereby attaching the text to Christ at the time of its first fulfillment.

Yet there is another connected reason for making the translational change. In the Gospels, Christ is referred to repeatedly as "the Lord", *ho kurios*, by his disciples. For example, when he comes to Galilee while the disciples are fishing without catching anything and directs them to put their net on the other side of the boat, after they realize their nets are full of fish, Peter recognizes who is on the shore and declares "It is the Lord," before plunging in to swim to shore.

If we understand "the Lord" as a common reference to Christ on earth and we link it to the Divine Name YHWH, or, as it is rendered in Greek, *ho on*, "He who Is", we understand the importance of the word order. To declare "God is the Lord"—well, who else would be the Lord but God? What, really, is the point of saying that? But to say, "The Lord (Jesus) is God"—that is an essential confession of the Christian faith and the Church's proclamation to the world, just as Israel's proclamation of YHWH as being the one true God was in their day. When the Prophet Elijah had his showdown with the prophets of Baal, he called upon YHWH, who sent fire upon the altar and its sacrifice. Seeing YHWH manifest His power this way after Baal had done nothing in response to his 450 prophets calling upon him all day, the people fell on their faces and cried, "The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God." Then the issue was who was the true God among many proclaimed deities in the world. The issue today remains the same, only YHWH the one true God has revealed Himself by taking upon Himself human flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ. Truly, the Lord Jesus is God who has revealed himself to us. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Upcoming Events 2024

13 August: Feast of St. Maximus
15 August: Dormition of Theotokos
1 September: Church New Year
29 September: Annual Meeting

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!