

The Confessor's Tongue for February 16, A. D. 2025

Pre-Lent: Sunday of the Prodigal Son; Martyr Pamphilius et al.

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.

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

On this day we commemorate the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is related in the holy Gospel according to Luke.

The theme of the Sunday of the Prodigal Son is repentance and returning to the Father's house after committing the folly of squandering the great riches given by the Father.

In the hymns for this Sunday, the Church would help each of us is to see himself in the Prodigal, as a waster of the Father's riches, living in a land far from the Father, and sinking to life in a pigpen.

Man in falling was deprived of Paradise. Created in God's image, he had the potential to achieve the likeness of God, but he rejected this in order to try to become god in his own right and fulfill himself apart from his Creator. This man cannot accomplish in his own power, and the attempt leads only to his degradation. God made us for abundant life in Him rich in enduring treasures, but man has preferred to pursue the lesser, transient pleasures and good of the material world. Man squanders a great destiny and deprives himself of true wealth.

We who are baptized in Christ have been given a great deposit of grace from God. That grace regenerates us who were spiritually dead and works in us to conform us to the image of Christ. It is our task to work with it so that we bear abundant fruit and so please God who has redeemed us in Christ. This transformation is not automatic. We can neglect it. We can also work against it. Living in sin deadens our spiritual sensitivity, hinders the flow of God's grace, and renders the treasure of baptismal grace unfruitful.

Each of us must repent of his own efforts to follow Adam in his rebellion to make himself god. Each of us needs the second Baptism of tears (repentance and confession) to allow us to recover the baptismal grace we have squandered and be renewed in it. Each of us needs to lay aside the sin which so easily entangles us and every weight that hinders us so that we may run the race of faith with endurance and win a prize. The Great Fast which lies before us is given to us for this end. *Fr. Justin*

On Gloating

Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: Lest the Lord see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him.
Proverbs 24:17-18

When bad people, arrogant people, ignorant outspoken people who have flown high come crashing down and get their just deserts and a taste of their own medicine, people who have suffered at their hands and mouths are greatly tempted to rejoice. To see people who have promoted or done wrong fall readily brings gladness to the hearts of those wronged and helps satisfy their deep desire for justice. At last, they get "what they deserve" or get a taste of their own medicine. Since the

last general election, on social media, some take pleasure in videos of their ideological enemies ranting, screaming, cursing, crying as those whose views were recently enscenced in the highest places of our society now struggle to come to terms with their fall. Many accounts post such videos with unconcealed glee with the words "cry more."

Christians are to hate evil. They are to rejoice in what is good and grieve over what is evil, and when God by His just judgments brings sinners down and exalts the righteous, this is cause for joy.

Care is in order, though. Even though a turn of events may bring gladness and may well be God's judgment visited on evildoers, the words of Solomon warn us of the limits of our rejoicing. Mocking, gloating, demeaning the fallen—this behavior neglects our own vulnerability to divine justice and forgets that our true enemy is not our fellow man but the devil and his demons, who have deceived and taken captive much of the human race to do their will rather than God's. Lies, error, delusion—sin in general—will sooner or later bring a man down, but we are not to rejoice in his fall but to seek his healing. We are to remember what just judgment we merit for our own sins and to thank God for His mercy towards us.

Our gloating over the fall of sinners does not please the Lord. If our enemies fall under God's judgment, we should pray for them that God would bring them to repentance, illumine them, and heal them. *Fr. Justin*

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 3

Someone asked Abba Anthony, "What must one do in order to please God?" The old man replied, "Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these precepts and you will be saved."
Anthony Saying 3 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

Commentary: These three words are not quite what one might expect as an answer to such a question. So what is their significance?

"Always have God before your eyes." We are to live in such a way that we always remember God, always think of Him present and observing us in all that we do. It entails remembering that we are His and appointed to do His will in all things. This is not so easy. It is easy to confess faith in Christ and then live great portions of our life as 'practical atheists', thinking not of God, asking not His help and blessing on all that we do, seeking not to know Him and please Him in all, carelessly falling repeatedly into sin. But He is our Creator who is "everywhere present" and who fills all things. In Him we live, and move, and have our being. Without Him, we can do nothing. Keeping God always before our eyes, doing all the we do for the sake of Christ, and giving thanks to God always for all things keeps us from sin and keeps our lives focused on their true end and sanctifies all that we do. If we achieve this,

we shall have made significant progress toward the fullness of life in Christ. St. Justin of Chelije puts it this way: "For someone to believe in Christ entails his waiting on Christ, and only on Christ, with every event of his life." There is no area of life which is exclusively man's to the exclusion of Christ, no area of which Christ as Lord and King does not say, "Mine." When we say 'mine' and shut God out as irrelevant, we do not have Him before our eyes.

"Do everything according to the testimony of the holy Scripture." In holy Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we find God's will for us revealed. If we are truly His children, we shall seek to do His will. But how can we do it if we don't know it, or are indifferent to it? As St. John Chrysostom says, "This is the cause of all evils, the not knowing the Scriptures." How many sins and mistakes we would avoid, how much unnecessary suffering would not be ours if only we would "take heed to our ways according to His word." Hence at every Vespers and Matins we pray, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes; blessed art Thou, O Master, make me to understand Thy statutes; blessed art Thou, O Holy One, enlighten me with Thy statutes. We cannot do what we do not know; to do rightly, we must understand; and in the keeping of Christ's commandments, we gain enlightenment. In this we demonstrate our love for God: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." The Christian who neglects holy Scripture puts himself in the position of going into the daily spiritual battle without guidance and unarmed—not a recipe for victory.

"In whatever place you live, do not easily leave it." A whole book could be written on the spiritual harm in moving from place to place frequently and without good reason. Consider the man who attends a local parish for a time while he enjoys it and the people, and then begins to feel dissatisfaction with it. "The priest doesn't affirm me enough, and the people irritate me and don't understand me," he says. "I need to find another parish with a better priest and people who will understand me and not annoy me." He then leaves his parish to go to another. All too often, a pattern of such behavior develops. Notice that, in his mind, all the problems lie outside of him. It is the priest or it is the people, never himself. But moving to a new parish when things get difficult or unpleasant delivers him from ever having to take a hard look at himself. God sets in a parish to build into His temple made of living stones—us. But that requires fitting us in with others. We don't always fit at first, so God 'bashes' us against others to knock off our rough edges. (We don't think much about how our shortcomings and rough edges affect others, only about how theirs affect us!) As Fr. Hopko liked to say, "We go to church so that we may be lacerated by the Word and bashed by the Holy Spirit." God accomplishes most of that bashing and lacerating through the priest and people. We shall never grow into a mature man in Christ if we do not subject ourselves to this process. Nature itself clearly shows that a plant often transplanted will never grow to its full potential or fruitfulness. So, to put this word another way: bloom where God has planted you if you wish to please God—unless He gives you a compelling reason to go elsewhere. *Fr. Justin*

Ten Essential Conditions for Coming to Know God's Truth and Finding Life

Fr. Thomas Hopko

The *belief* that the truth of things can be known, and the *desire* to know the truth and to do it, wherever it leads, is most essential. Indeed it is everything. When people have this desire and seek truth in order to do it, and are ready to do it whatever it takes to find it, know it and do it, God promises that they will find, and understand and live. In a sense, this desire and seeking is all that is necessary.

The seeking person must read the New Testament through, slowly and without judgment of details, at least two or three times, taking the time needed to do this. He should let go of what is not clear, and focus on what he can understand, what is clear to him. It would also be helpful to read a Psalm or two every day.

The person must pray, as he can. If he claims to be Christian, at least somehow, he should say the Lord's Prayer, and other prayers of the Church tradition, and attend Liturgical services, without serving or singing or reading. If he is not a Christian, or is unsure, he must at least pray, "to whom it may concern," saying something like, "if you are there, teach me, lead me, guide me..."

The person must eat good foods in moderation. A couple of days a week (like Wednesday and Friday) the person should fast; eating much less than usual. During this search the person should abstain from all alcohol, tobacco and drugs, except a minimal amount of wine with meals. If overeating or drinking, smoking or drug-taking is a problem, the seeker must get formal help, like, for example, a twelve-step program.

The person should abstain from all sexual activity unless he is married and expressing love (and not just having sex). There should be no television or internet porn. If sex is an addictive problem, he must take steps to get formal help.

The person should sit alone and still in silence for at least a half hour each day. He should watch his thoughts, but not engage them. He should say a very short prayer while doing this, to avoid engaging his thoughts.

The person should give at least a couple of hours a week to charitable work, and should give away some of his money (if he can) in a sacrificial way. He should do this, as far as possible, without anyone knowing what he is doing.

The person should open his life fully to at least one other trustworthy person, telling absolutely everything, without editing or hiding anything: their thoughts, dreams, temptations, actions, sins, fears, anxieties, etc.

The person must regularly talk with someone trustworthy specifically about his family of origin: his family history going back as far as possible, his childhood, relations with his parents and grandparents and siblings, their spiritual and religious history, his sexual history, education, etc.

The person must find a community of friends with whom to struggle to know the truth and to find life. The search cannot be done alone. We need each other.

Upcoming Events 2025

1 March: Forgiveness Vespers, 5:00 p.m.
3-8 March: Clean Week
14-19 April: Holy Week
20 April: Great and Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!