

# The Confessor's Tongue for March 23, A. D. 2025

Third Sunday of Lent; Veneration of the Precious Cross

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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## **The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 8**

*Abba Anthony said, "Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God."*

Saying 8 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

*Commentary:* Man has a propensity for getting caught up in the form of something without attaining the substance. Indeed, St. Paul warns us about those who "have a form of godliness", who outwardly look pious in some ways, but who "deny the power thereof," who have not entered into the essence and experienced its power, who confess Christ with their lips, but have not come to know Him in the depths of their heart. It is possible to use the right forms, have the right externals, and the right dogma, and still have one's heart far from God and His transforming power.

For this reason St. Seraphim of Sarov instructs us that the goal of the spiritual life is acquisition of the Holy Spirit, a filling that overflows and guides our whole life. The external forms of spiritual life are not the end but the means to acquire this.

Discernment is a spiritual gift that enables the possessor to see to the heart of things, to know their true nature. Those lacking it, unless they have wise guidance from another person, can easily confuse form with substance. Consider the many who will say on the day of judgment "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works?", to whom Jesus will respond, "I never knew you, depart from Me ye that work iniquity." This is a tragic case. They thought they were serving God but, lacking discernment, they actually were serving themselves, doing their "own thing."

Monks and nuns are susceptible to this temptation along with the rest of us. "I eat once a week. I have no possessions but the rags on my back. I sleep but two hours in twenty-four. I do 3000 prostrations and read through the Psalter and Gospels each day while standing." Such confuse the strictness of their ascetic practice with true knowledge of God; they may, in fact, do these things because they take pleasure in their own strictness, or the reputation it wins them in the eyes of men. They take pleasure in comparing themselves to their neighbor and finding themselves stricter. They readily fall prey to judging their weaker brethren. All their self-directed ascetic activity, in fact, makes them worse.

Thus, in the Church, a moderate asceticism that curbs the body's passions so that the body may be subject to the spirit without doing harm to the body or giving ready grounds for pride is recommended. And our activity should always be guided by someone other than ourselves, for "He who chooses himself as his spiritual guide has chosen a fool."

A particular area where Christians must acquire discernment is in the area of their thoughts. All sin begins with a thought that flits into the mind. Often that thought appears innocent on the surface. It is discernment that penetrates the thought's seeming innocence to perceive the spiritual danger it will bring if accepted or acted upon. Discernment then works together with spiritual alertness and watchfulness. Watchfulness catches the thoughts as they enter the mind; discernment reveals them for what they are. Is this a good thought? Is it from God? Will it produce good fruit? Or is this a temptation? a deception from the demons? Without watchfulness and discernment in his thoughts, a person will be the plaything of the demons as they take pleasure in sowing tempting thoughts in his head and watching him fall into sin, and sin separates man from God—not that God is not there, but that man's awareness of God and ability to receive grace is diminished. Because of its vital role in the warfare with thoughts, the monks have prized the gift of discernment of thoughts above all others.

Our goal in Christian life is to come to know and love God with all our heart and to love one another as Christ has loved us. This is only possible through the grace of God filling us and transforming us. Proper ascetic practice with discernment brings us closer to this goal, while a deluded practice brings us into pride and vainglory. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

## **The Mystery of Holy Unction**

*Fr. Thomas Hopko*

Christ came to the world to "bear the infirmities" of men. One of the signs of his divine messiahship was to heal the sick. The power of healing remains in the Church since Christ himself remains in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of the unction of the sick is the Church's specific prayer for healing. If the faith of the believers is strong enough, and if it is the will of God, there is every reason to believe that the Lord can heal those who are diseased.

The sacrament of anointing is a "sobornal" sacrament in the traditional Orthodox practice. This means that as many of the faithful as possible are gathered to participate in the prayers. The rite itself calls for seven priests, seven readings from the epistles and gospels, seven prayers and seven anointings with oil specifically blessed for the service. Although it is not always possible to perform the sacrament in this way, the normal procedure is still to gather together as many priests and people as possible.

The express purpose of the sacrament of holy unction is healing and forgiveness. Since it is not always the will of God that there should be physical healing, the prayer of Christ that God's will be done always remains as the proper context of the

sacrament. In addition, it is the clear intention of the sacrament that through the anointing of the sick body the sufferings of the person should be sanctified and united to the sufferings of Christ. In this way, the wounds of the flesh are consecrated, and strength is given that the suffering of the diseased person may not be unto the death of his soul, but for eternal salvation in the resurrection and life of the Kingdom of God.

It is indeed the case that death inevitably comes to man. All must die, even those who in this life are given a reprieve through healing in order to have more time on the earth. Thus, the healing of the sick is not itself a final goal, but is merely "instrumental" in that it is given by God as a sign of his mercy and as a grace for the further opportunity of man to live for him and for others in the life of this world.

In the case where a person is obviously in the final moments of his earthly life, the Church has special prayers for the "separation of soul and body." Thus, it is clear that the sacrament of holy unction is for the sick-both the physically and mentally sick-and is not reserved for the moment of death. The sacrament of unction is not the "last rites" as is sometimes thought; the ritual of the anointing itself in no way indicates that it should be administered merely in "extreme" cases. Holy unction is the sacrament of the spiritual, physical, and mental healing of a sick person whatever the nature or the gravity of the illness may be.

*Holy Unction will be served this Thursday evening at 6:00 at St. Seraphim Cathedral.*

### **The Power in Guarding the Tongue**

When Abba Macarius was praying in his cell on one occasion, he heard a voice from God, which said, "Macarius, thou hast not yet attained to the state of excellence of two women who are in such and such a city." The old man rose up in the morning, and took in his hand a palm stick, and he began to set out on the road to that city. Now, therefore, when he had arrived at the city, and learned the place of the abode of the two women, he knocked at the door, and there went forth one of the women and brought him into the house.

And when he had been sitting down for a little, the other woman came in, and he called them to him, and they came nigh and sat down before him. Then the old man said to them, "On your account I have made this long journey, and have performed all this labor, and with great difficulty have come from the desert; tell me, then, what are thy works?"

And they said unto him, "Believe us, O father; neither of us hath ever been absent from, or kept herself from her husband's couch up to this day; what work, then, wouldest thou see in us?"

Then the old man made apologies to them and entreated them to reveal to him and to show him their spiritual labor, and therefore they said unto him, "According to worldly considerations we are strangers one to the other, for we are not kinsfolk, but it fell

out that the two of us married two men who are brethren. And behold, up to this present we have lived in this house for twelve years, and we have never wanted to quarrel with each other, and neither of us hath spoken one abominable word of abuse to her companion. Now we made up our minds together to leave our husbands and to join the army of virgins, but, although we entreated our husbands earnestly to allow us to do so, they would not undertake to send us away. And as we were unable to do that which we wished, we made a promise between ourselves and God that, until death, no worldly word should go forth from our mouths."

Now when Macarius heard this, he said, "Truly, virginity by itself is nothing, nor marriage, nor life as a monk, nor life in the world; for God seeketh the love of a man, and giveth the Spirit unto him."

### **On Judging Others**

*from St. John of the Ladder, Step 10*

If you want to overcome the spirit of slander, blame not the person who falls but the prompting demon. No one wants to sin against God, even though all of us sin without being compelled to it.

Do not make judgment, and you will travel no quicker road to the forgiveness of your sins. "Judge not, so that you may not be judged".

Fire and water do not mix, neither can you mix judgment of others with the desire to repent. If a man commits a sin before you at the very moment of his death, pass no judgment, because the judgment of God is hidden from men. It has happened that men have sinned greatly in the open but have done greater good deeds ins secret, so that those who would disparage them have been fooled, with smoke instead of sunlight in their eyes. So listen to me, all you accountants of other people's faults, listen well; for it, as is certain, it is true that 'you shall be judged with the judgment you have used yourselves', then whatever sin of body or spirit that we ascribe to our neighbor we will surely fall into ourselves.

Those who pass speedy and harsh judgments on the sins of their neighbors fall into this passion because they themselves have so far failed to achieve a complete and unceasing memory of and concern for their own sins. Anyone untrammled by self-love and able to see his own faults for what they are would worry about no one else in this life. He would feel that his time on earth did not suffice for his own mourning, even if he lived a hundred years, and even if a whole Jordan of tears poured out of his eyes. Mourning of that kind has, as I know, no trace in it of slander or harsh judgment.

### **Upcoming Events 2025**

27 March: Holy Unction, St. Seraphim, 6:00 p.m.  
14-19 April: Holy Week  
20 April: Great and Holy Pascha  
12-13 August: Bishop Gerasim visits  
5 October: St. Jonah feast day in Alpine with Bishop

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