

The Confessor's Tongue for December 20, 2009

Sunday Before the Nativity of Christ;

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 Sunday Before Nativity

In the services of this week are glorified the Old Testament saints, from whose human family came our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the Gospel appointed for this Sunday is read the "genealogy" of Jesus Christ. Together with these on this Sunday, as well as on the Sunday of the Forefathers (see Dec. 11), are commemorated all those living in faith and all the Old Testament saints who have come to the Savior, who are listed in the Epistle reading for this Sunday.

December 20: St. Ignatius the Godbearer

We celebrate the feast of the martyr Ignatius the Godbearer. As the "brightly shining lamp of the church", "the pillar of patience and the rule of courage and the confirmation of faith", he was the disciple of the Holy Apostle John the Theologian and the second (after St. Evodius) Bishop of Antioch. He ruled his own flock for 40 years, showing himself an example of a highly virtuous life. He was the first to establish antiphonal singing in the church. During the Dometian persecution, the holy shepherd "with the rudder of prayer and fasting, with indefatigableness in doctrine and zealousness of spirit, counteracted the turmoil in order that none would sink from lack of courage or inexperience", and from his side he expressed full readiness to accept the crown of martyrdom. This was his desire, and to his sincere joy it was soon fulfilled. During the reign of Trajan, St. Ignatius for his confession and propagation of the Christian faith was sent to Rome in fetters where for the entertainment of the people he was given to be torn apart by wild beasts in the Coliseum in the year 107. On the way to Rome, St. Ignatius wrote seven epistles. He was called God-bearer because in his childhood, according to tradition, he was taken into the hands of Jesus Christ Himself. But also because he became so used to feeding his heart with the memory of the sweet name of Jesus Christ, that this deep spiritual seal with sensitive images was stamped on this bodily organ and when, after his martyr's death, when his heart was cut asunder, the name of Jesus Christ was seen alphabetically represented in it.

Library Corner: Review

Leif Pierson

Nicholas Mavromagoulos, *In Search of the Truth: A Jehovah's Witness' Search for the Historical Church.* (2009)

Originally published in Greece, this book traces two interconnected spiritual journeys. Friends Nikos and George both spent years as Jehovah's Witnesses, that is, members of the "Watchtower Society." This religion claims to be Christian, but it denies basic doctrines of the historical Church including the Trinity and the full divinity of Christ. Like many cults, the Society cultivates an "us vs. them" mentality that sees non-members as doomed to perdition. All

opposition from outside is viewed as evidence that the Society alone holds the truth.

This book points out that the clergy and other spokesmen for the Orthodox Church do not always present a good defense of the faith. The author includes several instances in which Orthodox theologians failed to counter heretical teaching, or weren't even serious about the discussion. An underlying issue throughout the book is the secularism and nominal, "outward" Christianity that has sadly taken hold in much of modern Greece.

Nikos was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. His arguments in school against the Orthodox teacher impressed his friend George, who came from an Orthodox background. George himself then converted to the Watchtower Society, which claims to have the only true interpretation of the scriptures.

As an adult, Nikos was bothered by the Society's habit of amending its own doctrines, often returning to an earlier teaching once considered in error. He engaged in a debate with an Orthodox Christian who knew how to defend his faith. He also researched a particular point of chronology whereby the Society claimed that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 607 B.C. and Christ began his rule of God's "heavenly government" in A.D. 1914 (2,520 years later). The Society's dates turned up wrong, but even more significant was the way in which members were condemned for questioning official teachings. During his process of leaving the Society (described in the book's longest chapter), Nikos made sure to debate as many Witnesses as possible in order to expose their errors.

George also left the Society, having suffered persecution for questioning certain teachings. After experimenting with some evangelical and pentecostal groups, both men entered the Orthodox Church. The book goes on to describe some challenges they faced as recent converts.

In Search of the Truth contains an interesting account of two men who struggled to extract themselves from one of the sects of our time. The American reader must "translate" the book into our cultural context, but that shouldn't cause much difficulty. One message from the book is the importance of knowing how to defend one's faith. As the debates in Mavromagoulos' book make clear, no one's authority is scripture alone. The authority comes from whoever is *interpreting* scripture.

The Holy Supper

The Holy Supper is a tradition of the Carpatho-Russian and Polish peoples. Held on Nativity Eve, the last day of the 40-day Nativity Fast, it is a strict lenten meal: no meat, dairy, or other animal products are eaten.

In the old country, the Holy Supper was a family affair held in the home at dark, and after the meal,

the family went to the Nativity Vigil at church, which was served about 10:00 p.m.

At the supper itself, first, the bread is broken—no knives are used at the Holy Supper. Then a piece of garlic is dipped in salt, symbolizing the bitterness of life. The bread is then dipped in honey, symbolizing the sweetness of life and the Bread of Life. The garlic, bread, and honey are eaten together first. The other dishes are then eaten. With twelve dishes, the Holy Supper appears to be a feast rather than a Lenten meal. In fact, only small portions of the food are eaten. It is customary that one eats at least one bite of each dish whether one likes it or not!

December 25: Nativity of Our Lord

The birth of our Lord Jesus Christ by the Ever Virgin Mary (Matt. 1:18-25, 2:1-12; Luke 2:1-20) in Bethlehem is celebrated on the present day. The beginning of the establishment of this feast belongs to the earliest time of the Church. In the standard opinion, the feast of the Nativity of Christ is older in the Western Church than in the Eastern; but this should only be understood regarding the time of celebrating the feast on December 25. In the Eastern Churches it was celebrated on January 6 until the 4th century and was known by the name of Theophany. This feast had a special character and was dedicated not only strictly to the memory of the birth or baptism of Christ, but, in general, to the appearance of God in the flesh, to the revelation in Christ and through Christ of the divine grace. This is why the feast is called Theophany. The initial basis for celebrating the Nativity of Christ on January 6 was not the historical connection of the birth of the Lord to this date, who even for antiquity remained an unknown person, but the mystical understanding of the relationship between the first and second Adam, between the originator of sin and death and the Author of life and salvation. The second Adam [Christ], according to the mystical understanding of the ancient Church, was born and died on the same day on which the first Adam was created and died, - on the sixth corresponding to January 6, the first month of year. Thus the unity between the Eastern and Western Churches concerning the time of celebrating the birth on December 25 is established only since the 4th century.

The Holy Church celebrating the Nativity of Christ morally teaches us the holy life of the One Who was worthy to be born the Lord. "For us today is born a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord", "for the sake of humanity and for our salvation", and we, now celebrating this birth of Christ the Lord, naturally, should ignite in ourselves the determination to be reborn from a sinful life to a life holy and pleasing to God. Our Lord Jesus Christ having come down to earth entered into a relationship of grace with us and "was not ashamed to call us brethren" (Heb. 2:11); but, in order for us to be worthy of this lofty dialogue and of union, in order not to turn ourselves away from the Lord Who came down from the heavens, it is necessary for us to leave the darkness of sin and to

come nearer to light of faith, piety and good deeds. The Creator and Master of heaven and earth appeared in the world not in glory and magnificence, but in need, poverty and humiliation; the King Who reigns and the Lord Who dominates accepts not luxurious chambers, but a poor cave. By this the majesty of humility, poverty, meekness, simplicity and the perniciousness of pride, riches, vanity and luxury is shown to us. Worthy to be the first to hear the good news of the angels about the birth of the Savior of the world and the first to worship Him were simple Bethlehem shepherds (about them see below), and after them the wise Persian magi (about them see below), and thus at the manger of the Savior we see two sorts of people - shepherds and magi, i.e. the simplest people and the most educated people. By this we are inspired that the Lord accepts each and all: those pleasing to Him and the simple illiterate, when they are connected to the true fulfillment of their calling, with the purity of conscience and life; human wisdom is not rejected by Him when it is able to subordinate itself to the inspiration from above and uses its knowledge to the glory of God and for the use of neighbor. This teaches each one to be content with his participation and at the same time demonstrates that no calling and position interferes with their coming nearer to God, that pure and sincere labor, inspired by faith and hope in God is the conscientious fulfillment of the duties always pleasing to God and attracts His blessing that in the eyes of God the precious things are not external advantages in the light, but purity of heart and of conscience, meekness and humility of spirit, submissiveness and obedience to the law of God, patience and compliance, hope and fidelity to will of God, gentleness and goodwill to neighbor, going irreproachably before God in all the commandments and precepts, that these precious qualities do not belong exclusively to any estate, that in all callings and positions the person may be pleasing to God, if he will be well pleasing to Him in word, desire and thought. In general the event of the appearance of God in the flesh picturesquely described in the festal services with all the circumstances surrounding it represents by itself an inexhaustible source for our edification.

Upcoming Events 2009-2010

- 24 December, Thursday, 5:30 p.m. Nativity Eve Vigil, 7:30 p.m. Holy Supper.
- 28 December – 2 January: 5th Annual Orthodox Service Retreat at St. George, Pharr, Texas, for teens and college-age adults.
- 23 January, 2010, North Texas Orthodox Mission (NTOM) Pre-Lenten Retreat at Holy Trinity with Fr. Joseph Honeycutt, 8:45 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
- 13 February 2010, 6:00 p.m. Forgiveness Vespers, Great Lent Begins.
- 26-27 February 2010 Metropolitan Jonah visits.
- 4 April 2010, Holy Pascha, the Feast of Feasts.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!