

The Confessor's Tongue for November 28, 2010

27th Sunday After Pentecost: St. Stephen the New

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 Sayings of St. Anthony the Great

Abba Anthony said, "Nine monks fell away after many labors and were obsessed with spiritual pride, for they put their trust in their own works and, being deceived, they did not give due heed to the commandment that says, 'Ask your father, and he will tell you.'" (Deuteronomy 32:7)

Saying 37 Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: It is often said that it is the condition in which Christ finds us at our death or at His return that will determine our eternal destiny. The best beginning to life in Christ will avail us nothing if we do not end well. Here Anthony speaks of nine monks who labored long and hard in prayer, fasting, vigils, poverty, almsgiving, labor and so on. Yet they fell away, and unless they later repented before the end, it was that state of fallenness that determined their destiny, not all their prior struggle and virtues. For this reason, at ever service in the Church, we pray for a Christian end to our lives and that we may end our life in repentance. Christian life begins with repentance, but unless it also ends in repentance, it will fall short of Christ.

Pride was the sin that brought about the fall of these zealous monks. Solomon writes in the Proverbs, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Pride is a luxury we cannot afford, for it will always bring us down. These monks looked at their lives and works, probably compared themselves to others who weren't doing as much, were deceived into thinking that they were better than they were, and began to trust in themselves and their own virtue.

Anthony explains in what form their pride manifested itself: they did not follow the commandment to "Ask your father, and he will tell you." Monks from early on have understood this to mean that they cut off their self will by submitting to an abbot or an elder, and they do nothing without his blessing and they open their thoughts fully to him and hide nothing. These nine monks after considerable monastic experience had neglected to submit themselves fully to their abba. Perhaps it was small, seemingly insignificant matters that they did not ask him about at first, but as they neglected the command in little things, their neglect grew and with it the pride and self will that overthrew them.

We may not be under obedience to an elder as monks are, but we have our parents, our husbands, our wives, our employers, our teachers, our clergy who serve in limited ways a similar role. Neglecting to get counsel from the wise people God has put in our lives and failing to submit to our authorities (parents, spouse, etc.) is always a recipe for spiritual disaster.

Fr. Justin Frederick

28 November: St. Stephen the New

As at one time Hannah, the moth of the Prophet Samuel, prayed to God to give her a son, so did Anna, the mother of Stephen. Praying thus in the Church of Blachernae before the icon of the Most-holy Theotokos, a light sleep overcame her, and she saw the Most-holy Virgin as radiant as the sun, and heard a voice from the icon: "Woman, depart in peace. In accordance with your prayer, you have a son in your womb." Anna indeed conceived and gave birth to a son.

At sixteen, Stephen received the monastic tonsure on Mt. Auxentius near Constantinople, from the elder John, who also taught him divine wisdom and asceticism. When John entered into rest in the Lord, Stephen remained on the mountain in a life of strict asceticism, taking upon himself labor upon labor. His holiness attracted many disciples to him.

When Emperor Constantine Copronymous was persecuting icons more ferociously than his foul father Leo the Isaurian, Stephen showed himself a zealous defender of the veneration of holy icons. The demented emperor accepted various obscene slanders against Stephen and personally plotted intrigues to break Stephen and get him out of the way. Stephen was banished to the island of Proconnesus, then taken to Constantinople, chained, and cast into prison, where he was met by 342 monks, brought from all over and imprisoned for their veneration of the icons. There, in prison, they carried out the whole church typicon as in a monastery. Then the wicked emperor condemned Stephen to death. The saint saw his death forty days in advance, and asked forgiveness of the brethren. The emperor's servants dragged him from prison, and beating and pulling him, dragged him through the streets of Constantinople, calling upon all those loyal to the emperor to stone this "enemy of the emperor." One of the heretics struck the saint on the head with a piece of wood, and the saint gave up his soul. As St. Stephen the Protomartyr suffered at the hands of the Jews, so this Stephen suffered at the hands of the iconoclastic heretics. This glorious soldier of Christ suffered in the year 767 at the age of fifty-three, and was crowned with unfading glory.

Upcoming Events 2010

2 December: St. Maximus Male Choir, "Chantus Maximus" sings at the city of Denton tree lighting.

22 December: Metropolitan Jonah visits.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!