

The Confessor's Tongue for January 16, A. D. 2011

34th Sunday After Pentecost: Sunday before Theophany; Chains of St. Peter

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.

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 they can understand, what is clear to him. It would also be helpful to read a Psalm or two everyday.

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 they are 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, their 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.

"Perverse Thoughts Separate Men from God" Part Six

From Elder Paisios in "Elder Paisios of the Holy Mt."

We once asked Father Paisios: "Father, you constantly tell us to have positive thinking. We would like you to give us some advice on how to deal with the following problem.

"Often, people come to us to tell us that some priests charge a lot of money for performing the Holy Sacraments; they say that they smoke, or hang around coffee shops; they even say that some priests are involved in immoral acts, and, in general, make strong accusations against them and present evidence to justify them. What answers can we give to people who accuse the clergy?"

The Elder started by telling us, "I know from experience that in this life people are divided into two categories. A third category does not exist. The first one resembles the fly. The main characteristic of the fly is that it is attracted by filth. For example, when a fly is found in a garden full of flowers with beautiful fragrances, it will ignore them and will go sit on top of some filth found on the ground. It will start messing around with it and feel comfortable with the bad smell. If the fly could talk, and you asked it to show you a rose in the garden, it would answer: 'I don't even know what a rose looks like. I only know where to find garbage, toilets, and filth.' There are some people who resemble the fly. People belonging to this category have learned to think negatively, and always look for the bad things in life, ignoring and refusing the presence of good.

"The other category is like the bee, whose main characteristic is to always look for something sweet and nice to sit on. When a bee is found in a room full of filth and there is a small piece of sweet in a corner, it will ignore the filth and will go to sit on top of the sweet. Now, if we ask the bee to show us where the garbage is, it will answer: 'I don't know. I can only tell you where to find flowers, sweets, honey, and sugar'; it only knows the good things in life and is ignorant of all evil. This is the second category of people who have a positive thinking, and see only the good side of things. They always try to cover up the evil in order to protect their fellow men; on the contrary, people

in the first category try to expose the evil and bring it to the surface.

"When someone comes to me and starts accusing other people, and puts me in a difficult situation, I tell him the above example. Then, I ask him to decide to which category he wishes to belong, so he may find people of the same kind to socialize with.

Elder Paisios was constantly stressing the importance of pious thinking in spiritual life. He used to say that a single positive thought equals a vigil on Mount Athos. Once, he told us the following incident.

"One day someone came to see me, but as I was busy, I told him to wait in the chapel. Later on, when he left the chapel to come into my guestroom, I did not notice that he had forgotten to take his cigarettes and had left them on the chapel's seat. Meanwhile, another guest arrived; he also went into the chapel to wait, until I was free to see him. When I called him in, he asked me,

'Elder, do you smoke?'

'No,' I said. 'Why are you asking?'

'I saw a pack of cigarettes in the chapel, that's why.'

'The person who was there before you must have forgotten them, but I did not notice it.'

After he left, a child came to visit me for the first time. He knocked on the door, and I immediately asked him what he wanted:

'I wish to see Elder Paisios. Is he here?'

'I'm afraid he is not,' I replied. 'He went to Karyes to buy cigarettes.'

The child answered innocently: 'It does not matter, Father. I will wait for him to come back.'

You see the difference between the two ways of thinking. The first person, who found the cigarettes in the chapel, had negative and suspicious thoughts, whereas the child, even then I told him that Elder Paisios went to buy cigarettes, reacted in the opposite way. He simply said he would wait, without asking if the Elder smokes or what he needs the cigarettes for. *To be continued...*

An Orthodox Confession Which Leads the Inward Man to Humility *From "The Way of a Pilgrim"*

Turning my eyes carefully upon myself and watching the course of my inward state, I have verified by experience that I do not love God, that I have no religious belief, and that I am filled with pride and sensuality. All this I actually find in myself as a result of detailed examination of my feelings and conduct, thus:

1. I do not love God. For if I loved God I should be continually thinking about Him with heartfelt joy. Every thought of God would give me gladness and delight. On the contrary, I much more often and much more eagerly think about earthly things, and thinking about God is labor and dryness. If I loved God, then talking with Him in prayer would be my

nourishment and delight and would draw me to unbroken communion with Him. But, on the contrary, I not only find no delight in prayer, but even find it an effort. I struggle with reluctance, I am enfeebled by sloth, and am ready to occupy myself eagerly with any unimportant trifle, if only it shortens prayer and keeps me from it. My time slips away unnoticed in futile occupations, but when I am occupied with God, when I put myself into His presence every hour seems like a year. If one person loves another, he thinks of him throughout the day without ceasing, he pictures him to himself, he cares for him, and in all circumstances his beloved friend is never out of his thoughts. But I, throughout the day, scarcely set aside even a single hour in which to sink deep down into meditation upon God, to inflame my heart with love of Him, while I eagerly give up twenty-three hours as fervent offerings to the idols of my passions. I am forward in talk about frivolous matters and things which degrade the spirit; that gives me pleasure. But in the consideration of God I am dry, bored and lazy. Even if I am unwillingly drawn by others into spiritual conversation, I try to shift the subject quickly to one which pleases my desires. I am tirelessly curious about novelties, about civic affairs and political events; I eagerly seek the satisfaction of my love of knowledge in science and art, and in ways of getting things I want to possess. But the study of the Law of God, the knowledge of God and of religion, make little impression on me, and satisfy no hunger of my soul. I regard these things not only as a non-essential occupation for a Christian, but in a casual way as a sort of side-issue with which I should perhaps occupy my spare time, at odd moments. To put it shortly, if love for God is recognized by the keeping of His commandments (If ye love Me, keep My commandments, says our Lord Jesus Christ), and I not only do not keep them, but even make little attempt to do so, then in absolute truth the conclusion follows that I do not love God. That is what Basil the Great says: 'The proof that a man does not love God and His Christ lies in the fact that he does not keep His commandments'.

2. I do not love my neighbor either. For not only am I unable to make up my mind to lay down my life for his sake (according to the Gospel), but I do not even sacrifice my happiness, well-being and peace for the good of my neighbor. If I did love him as myself, as the Gospel bids, his misfortunes would distress me also, his happiness would bring delight to me too. But, on the contrary, I listen to curious, unhappy stories about my neighbor and I am not distressed; I remain quite undisturbed or what is still worse, I find a sort of pleasure in them. Bad conduct on the part of my brother I do not cover up with love, but proclaim abroad with ensure. His well-being, honor and happiness do not delight me as my own, and, as if they were something quite alien to me, give me no feeling of gladness. What is more, they subtly arouse in me feelings of envy or contempt.

3. I have no religious belief. Neither in immortality nor in the Gospel. If I were firmly persuaded and believed without doubt that beyond the grave lies eternal life and recompense for the deeds of this life, I should be continually thinking of this. The very idea of immortality would terrify me and I should lead this life as a foreigner who gets ready to enter his native land. On the contrary, I do not even think about eternity, and I regard the end of this earthly life as the limit of my existence. The secret thought nestles within me: Who knows what happens at death? If I say I believe in immortality, then I am speaking about my mind only, and my heart is far removed from a firm conviction about it. That is openly witnessed to by my conduct and my constant care to satisfy the life of the senses. Were the Holy Gospel taken into my heart in faith, as the Word of God, I should be continually occupied with it, I should study it, find delight in it and with deep devotion fix my attention upon it. Wisdom, mercy, love, are hidden in it; it would lead me to happiness, I should find gladness in the study of the Law of God day and night. In it I should find nourishment like my daily bread and my heart would be drawn to the keeping of its laws. Nothing on earth would be strong enough to turn me away from it. On the contrary, if now and again I read or hear the Word of God, yet even so it is only from necessity or from a general love of knowledge, and approaching it without any very close attention, I find it dull and uninteresting. I usually come to the end of the reading without any profit, only too ready to change over to secular reading in which I take more pleasure and find new and interesting subjects.

4. I am full of pride and sensual self-love. All my actions confirm this. Seeing something good in myself, I want to bring it into view, or to pride myself upon it before other people or inwardly to admire myself for it. Although I display an outward humility, yet I ascribe it all to my own strength and regard myself as superior to others, or at least no worse than they. If I notice a fault in myself, I try to excuse it, I cover it up by saying, 'I am made like that' or 'I am not to blame'. I get angry with those who do not treat me with respect and consider them unable to appreciate the value of people. I brag about my gifts: my failures in any undertaking I regard as a personal insult. I murmur, and I find pleasure in the unhappiness of my enemies. If I strive after anything good it is for the purpose of winning praise, or spiritual self-indulgence, or earthly consolation. In a word, I continually make an idol of myself and render it uninterrupted service, seeking in all things the pleasures of the senses, and nourishment for my sensual passions and lusts.

Going over all this I see myself as proud, adulterous, unbelieving, without love to God and hating my neighbor. What state could be more sinful? The condition of the spirits of darkness is better than mine. They, although they do not love God, hate

men, and live upon pride, yet at least believe and tremble. But I? Can there be a doom more terrible than that which faces me, and what sentence of punishment will be more sever than that upon the careless and foolish life. that I recognize in myself?

Preparation for Holy Communion

Fr. Justin Frederick

We are reminded each week before Communion that only "Orthodox Christians who have prepared themselves with prayer, fasting, and a recent confession" should receive Christ's Body and Blood. What does this mean practically?

i. Prayer. Prayer is our spiritual breathing; not to pray suffocates our spiritual life. We are not ready for Communion if we have not been praying throughout the preceding week. Though we are to pray "at all times" and "without ceasing," Christians from the beginning, fulfilling the ancient Jewish practice of offering the morning and evening sacrifices, have prayed upon rising in the morning and before retiring in the evening. These set times of prayer are anchors for our spiritual lives, and to be ready to receive communion requires that we are praying regularly. The number of prayers or amount of time spent is part of each Christian's prayer rule which should be determined in consultation with his Confessor or Spiritual Father. Keeping one's prayer rule perfectly is not required to commune; but not praying at all or praying little during the week would not constitute adequate preparation.

Prayer also includes the particular "Prayers in Preparation for Holy Communion" which should be prayed either the evening before or morning of Communion. There are standard collections of these in the available prayer books.

The strict Russian practice involves praying three canons and an akathist the night before: the Canons of Repentance, to the Theotokos, and to the Guardian Angel. Then in the morning, one would pray the Order of Preparation for Holy Communion, which includes a canon for Communion. This is an excellent practice to follow. It should be strictly followed if one receives Communion only a few times a year. If, however, one is a regular communicant (which presupposes regular Confession, prayer, and fasting), one may simply pray the ten or so precommunion prayers found in the standard prayer book and the canon for Communion (also found in the St. Tikhon's and the Jordanville books). One should not normally pray less than this in preparation for Communion except in unusual circumstances or when so guided by one's Priest or spiritual father.

Attendance at the Saturday night "All-Night" Vigil (or at least at a portion of it) is also part of the normal preparation for the Eucharist. The whole liturgical cycle manifests a pattern of expectation and fulfillment. Thus the fast of Great Lent is kept in expectation of the Paschal feast. Each week, the Vigil

provides the proper liturgical expectation for the Sunday feast, for the "Little Pascha" that every Sunday is. Orthodox liturgical life cannot and should not be reduced to the Divine Liturgy. In the Divine Liturgy, we are given a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, but we do not live in the Kingdom as yet: we still live in the world, and our whole life in the world is preparation for Christ's eternal Kingdom. The Vigil has as its theme man's life in the world before (Vespers) and after (Matins) Christ's coming. We need the Vigil to prepare ourselves for Liturgy just as we need this life to prepare for the next. During the week, we grow very scattered, concerned about many things, and distracted from the things of God. The two hours of the Vigil helps us become recollected and refocused spiritually in preparation for receiving Communion with spiritual profit. Naturally, the time following the Vigil should be kept quiet as quiet and peaceful as possible, free from elective social engagements and secular entertainment as one prepares for the Eucharist the next morning.

One might occasionally miss the Vigil and still receive Communion, but we should know that the Vigil is part of our normal preparation for the Divine Liturgy and an essential part of living liturgically.

Lastly, having received Communion, our preparation for the following week begins with the "Prayers of Thanksgiving after Communion." If we do not stay in church after the Liturgy and attentively hear the prayers read there, we must read them on our own the same day, the sooner after Communion the better.

None of this should be construed as a rigid legalism, but as a general guide to regular, consistent, healthy practice.

2. Fasting. Every Wednesday and Friday, the Church calls us to fast: on Wednesday in memory of Christ's betrayal, and on Friday in memory of His suffering and death. These fasts are not optional for Orthodox Christians. Rather, they are necessary and for our benefit. If we have willfully broken the fast, we should go the Confession before receiving Communion again.

Additionally, there is the fast prescribed from midnight the night before receiving Communion until we have received the Mystery. We abstain entirely from food, drink, and marital relations (some abstain all day the day before; certainly this part of the fast would start no later than Vespers the night before). If we have not kept these fasts the previous week, we should not commune without Confession.

3. A Recent Confession. The Holy Synod of Bishops has directed that regular communicants (receiving the Holy Mysteries more than once a month) should receive the Mystery of Confession not less than once a month, even if they have nothing particularly "serious" or unusual to confess. Regular confession is part of the rhythm of a healthy spiritual, liturgical life.

If you don't receive Communion at least once a month and don't live liturgically, you must receive the Mystery of Confession each time you commune. Moreover, the preparation for Communion the preceding week may be stricter. At the least, no Orthodox Christian should go without Confession and Communion during each of the year's four fasts: the Nativity Fast (Nov-Dec), Great Lent, the Apostles' Fast (June), and the Dormition Fast (August). There is no formal obligation to do this, but it is difficult to imagine one seriously claiming to be an Orthodox Christian without making this minimal effort.

In reading this, you may think it too much for you to do. Remember three things.

First, Orthodoxy is maximalistic Christianity, not minimalistic. Christ gave His all for us; we give our all to Him.

Second, this is the **norm** of preparation for Communion. We should always strive to achieve the Church's maximalistic norm, but due to our weakness and circumstances, we may not be able to achieve it regularly or even at all. In such a case we confess our weakness and talk to our Priest or Confessor about what would be appropriate for us in our situation.

Third, the norm should not be seen as legalistic, but as therapeutic. This is what the Church in her long experience has found to bring the greatest spiritual help with the least spiritual danger to her members. If we receive the normal practice and expectation of the Church in faith as for our good and attempt to implement it by God's grace, we shall reap great spiritual benefit for the salvation of our souls. If we truly discerned what we are doing at the Divine Liturgy and what is being given to us in Holy Communion, we would fear and think that the required preparation too little! God offers His boundless, holy, life to us in exchange for our limited, tattered, soiled lives. Our failure to prepare diligently and attentively hinders our perception of what takes place at Communion, and so we are deprived of much joy and grace, while God, in His compassion, keeps the Mysteries from doing us harm in our careless state. But we must not presume on His mercy!

So, with prayer, fasting, and a recent confession, let us draw near to Christ in the Holy Mysteries in the fear of God, with faith and love and hearts full of gratitude as we more clearly perceive the greatness of God's gift.

Upcoming Events 2011

- 22 January: Russian Liturgy, 9:30 a.m.
- 28 January: Friday Night Prayer Vigil, 9:00
- 6 March: Sunday, 6:00 p.m. Forgiveness Vespers (everyone needs to plan on attending this service!)
- 7 March: Great Lent begins.
- 24 April: Holy Pascha: The Feast of Feasts!

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!