

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

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Martyr Longinus the Centurion

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.

October 16: Martyr Longinus

Longinus, from the village of Ardales, Cappadocia, was present at the crucifixion of the Lord on guard duty and a witness to His suffering and death. Seeing, Longinus confessed Jesus to be the song of God, left the worship of "dead idols", and returned to his home country where he began to preach the Gospel. For this reason warriors sent by Pilate due to the intrigues of the Judeans beheaded St. Longinus.

From Elder Barsanuphius of Optina

It is impossible to learn to fulfill the God's commandments without labor, and this labor is threefold: **prayer**, **fasting**, and **sobriety**. The Savior responded to the question of His disciples, why they could not cast out a demon: *Because of your unbelief... This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting* (Matt. 17:20-21). These three podvigs make us into conquerors of the enemies of our salvation.

The most difficult one is **prayer**. Every virtue, from practice, becomes a habit, but one must force oneself in prayer to one's very death. It is opposed by our "old man," and the enemy especially rises up against the one who prays. Prayer is the insinuation of death to the devil; it defeats him. Even the saints, such as St. Seraphim, had to force themselves in prayer, not to mention us sinners.

Our poet Lermontov, whose life ended so sadly [in a duel at age 27]—even he experienced the sweetness of prayer and described it in his poem:

*When life becomes too sorrowful
And weighs upon my heart,
I then recite a wonderful
Short prayer I know by heart.*

*Therein dwells grace so powerful,
Imbued with living words,
And breathes through inexplicable,
God-touching, sacred chords.*

*And when my burden disappears
And doubts no longer stay,
My soul is freed by holy tears,
And lifts my heart away.*

Unfortunately, prayer did not save him, because he expected only ecstasies and did not want to bear the labor of prayer.

The enemy attacks powerfully, instilling despair, despondency, and fear: *There have they feared with fear where no fear is* (Psalm 52:6). Sometimes a man loses heart, but such sorrow is unlawful—you must oppose the enemy with prayer and with the sign of the Cross, in which there is hidden incomprehensible power.

The second means is **fasting**. Fasting is twofold: outward—abstinence from forbidden foods, and inward—abstinence in all the senses, especially sight,

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from everything impure and foul. Some people understand only outward fasting. So, for instance, one person joins a group of people and in conversations the judging of his neighbors begins. He takes an active part in it, and steals much from the honor of his neighbor. Dinnertime comes. The guest is offered cutlets, suckling pig, and so on. He resolutely declares that he will not eat non-fast foods. "Go ahead, eat," his hosts persuade him. "After all, *not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of his mouth*" (Matt 15:11). "No, I'm strict about that," he declares.

Such a man doesn't even understand that he has already broken the inward fast, in judging his neighbor.

And this is why **sobriety** is so important. Laboring for his salvation, a man little-by-little purifies his heart from envy, hatred, and slander, and love is instilled in it....

When the Lord sent the Apostles out to preach, He commanded them not to think about what they would reply to the torturers, because the Holy Spirit would speak for them. This same Holy Spirit acts now as well in the Holy Scriptures and the sacred books, and in particular in the Lives of Saints. That is why this reading acts in such a way upon the soul—because it is given life by the Holy Spirit; in it is the word of life, while in the works of unbelievers is the word of death. This is why simple fishermen subdued the whole world, in such a way that learned unbelievers could not oppose the spirit of grace....

And so, my spiritual children, read the Holy Scriptures and the works of the Holy Fathers, because through them the Holy Spirit Himself is speaking; and let us not read the works of the kind of teachers that try to tear us away from Christ. May the Lord save us all from that. Let us follow the teaching of Christ alone, and we shall be saved....

Yes, the true teaching of Christ is capable of kindling even a cold heart. *I am come to send fire on the earth* (Luke 12:49), said the Savior. The grace of God covers and saves all who follow after Christ.

The Commandments of Christ

*"If ye love Me, you will keep my commandments."
John 14:15*

Orthodoxy is not some abstract system of belief to which a man gives intellectual assent for salvation. Rather it is a whole way of life, man's response to God's revelation of Himself in the God-man Jesus Christ, inseparably uniting right belief with right action. Right belief is expressed in the dogmas and teachings of the Church, while right action is most fully expressed by Christ's commandments.

The commandments are mentioned frequently in the prayers and services of the Church. Sometimes

they are called 'law' or 'statutes' or 'ordinances', but term names an expression of God's will for man.

Sometimes the hymns and prayers speak of our conflicted relationship with the commandments. "I have made myself a stranger to every divine commandment..." (*Tone 8, Mon Vespers*) and "I have fled Thy commandments, estranging myself from life, and draw nigh unto death..." (*Tone 8, Fri Matins, canon, ode 6*). Thus to depart from the commandments is to become a stranger to life and approach death.

Our estrangement from the commandments darkens our spiritual sight, blinding us, and making us unfit to see the Light, hindering us from looking upon Christ: "With what eyes shall I look upon Thee, O Christ, not having kept even one of Thy commandments?" (*Tone 8, Mon Matins, canon, ode 3*) The irmos of the fifth ode of the canon for Sunday and Wednesday Matins expresses this condition cries out for remedy: "Why hast Thou cast me away from Thy face, O never-setting Light? Why hath this dismal darkness covered me, the wretched one? But turn me and guide my path towards the light of Thy commandments I pray Thee."

Indeed, the Psalmist has said, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (118/119:105). The word and the commandments bring us light to dispel the gloom of sin. Thus we pray, "...grant me to walk in the light of Thy commandments, O Word, that I may glorify Thee in the morning watches" (*Tone 8, Tue Matins, canon, ode 5 irmos*).

When we make a man a catechumen, the Church prays, "Enable him to walk in all Thy commandments and to fulfill those things which are well-pleasing unto Thee; for if a man do those things, he shall find life in them." By confessing Christ as King and Lord, a man submits himself to Christ's commandments voluntarily; and the struggle to conform his life to them is at the heart of the process of purification, which is preeminently the purpose of the catechuminate. The keeping of the commandments and cleansing are connected as a hymn shows: "Make me to fulfill the commandments of God and cleanse the movements of my heart that I may praise Thee" (*Tone 8, Monday Vespers*).

Having baptized the catechumen, the Church requests in the closing lityany "that he may be kept in the faith of a pure confession, in all godliness, and the fulfilling of the commandments of Christ, all the days of his life," for Christ did not simply command us to baptize, thereby making converts, but also to teach "them to do all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (*Matt. 28:20*).

Thereafter, after every Communion in the Holy Mysteries, in giving thanks the faithful say, "Grant that they [these Mysteries] may become for me unto the observance of Thy commandments," and "grant that the communion of thy Holy Body and Blood of Thy Christ may be for us...unto the accomplishment of Thy commandments..." The commandments

remain our compass for life, and we seek through the Eucharist the grace to keep them. At Compline, the after supper daily prayer of the Church, the Church asks the Theotokos to "show me forth a proven doer of His commandments". And even at Marriage, the Church prays for the newly united couple, "Mercifully grant that they may life together in purity; and enable them to attain to a ripe old age, walking in Thy commandments with a pure heart."

Ultimately, the path of the commandments brings enlightenment, illumination, and holiness, and prepares us for theosis. The seventh prayer of light at Vespers, speaks of us "enlightened by the exercise of Thy commandments." In the prayer at Vespers "Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this evening without sin..." 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." A man must first learn God's statutes or commands. But he must also learn to understand them, why he needs them, what they imply for his life, and that they are not merely some arbitrary do's and don't's, but as an expression of God's will for man, they actually render us human. Knowing and understanding the commandments, a man will endeavor to do them rather than resist them, and the doing of them brings enlightenment and deep experiential knowledge of God.

One of the twelve prayers prayed by the priest at Matins expresses similar ideas: "Teach us, O God, Thy righteousness, Thy commandments, and Thy statutes; enlighten the eyes of our intelligence that we may never fall asleep unto death in sin." One of the reasons we struggle so much with sin is that we have not had "the eyes of our intelligence" sufficiently enlightened to see God's light clearly, and it is that light which allows us to see sin for what it is and be properly repulsed by it. Having the commandments and a fear of them is a great help in the battle against sin. As the priest prays in the ninth prayer of Matins and before the Gospel reading at the Liturgy, "Instill in us also the fear of Thy blessed commandments that, trampling down all carnal desires, we may pursue a spiritual way of life, both considering and doing all things well-pleasing unto Thee."

Understanding the centrality of Christ's commandments to the Christian life, that it is by keeping them a Christian demonstrates his love for Christ and actually loves his neighbor should move the seeker of Truth to study the commandments, to treasure them as the path to his object, and to pray and sing fervently at every Vespers and Vigil, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord; teach me Thy statutes."

Fr. Justin Frederick

Upcoming Events 2011

15 November, Tuesday: Nativity Fast Begins, Pan-Orthodox Unction at St. Seraphim's, Dallas

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!