

The Confessor's Tongue for February 5, A. D. 2012

Thirty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost: Publican & Pharisee; St. Agatha

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.

February 5: St. Agatha

Born in Palermo, Sicily, St. Agatha confessed the Christian faith from her young years. She was distinguished by beauty, virtuous life and wealth bequeathed her after the death of her parents. During the persecution of Decius (251), by an order of the governor of the country Quintian, who heard much about the beauty and wealth of Agatha, she was arrested and led to the governor in the city of Catania. This governor at first tried with caresses and admonitions to convert St. Agatha from the Christian faith. When she remained immovable, she was subjected to various cruel tortures. They hanged her from a tree, beat her with iron rods, planed her chest with iron claws and, finally, cut off her breasts. Later while in prison the prisoner was wonderfully healed by the Apostle Peter who was shown to her and, adorned "in the glory of faith and piety, venerability and virginity and diligence in suffering." In peace she gave her soul to the Lord God in 251. Soon a church was constructed over her relics.

Sunday of the Publican & Pharisee

The name of this first of four Sundays preparatory to the Great Fast was received from the appointed Gospel reading of the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, from which the first, from the image of the parable, left the temple for his house more justified than the second. By the example of one and the other the Holy Church points out the true beginning and basis of repentance: humility and, on the other hand, the main source of sin and obstacle to repentance, pride. According to the words of the Holy Church, "every good deed is made of no effect through foolish pride, while every evil is cleansed by humility." Without the humble consciousness of one's sinfulness, one cannot alone have the appropriate sense of one's high external righteousness. In this idea the faithful also should begin the ascetical effort of fasting and repentance. In accordance with this core content, the Holy Church in all its services for this Sunday, especially in the Vespers and Matins stichera and in the troparia of the canon, denouncing, agreeing with the Gospel parable, the self-righteous pride of the Pharisee, praises the humility of the Publican and calls each of us to reject "the swollen boasting and evil folly of the Pharisee, his loathsome pride, and the wicked cruelty hateful to God" to lay aside self-conceit about one's imaginary worthiness and perfection, the self-sufficiency of one's imaginary righteousness to humble oneself by consciousness of one's unworthiness and guilt before God, to condemn oneself, as a sinner, worthy of condemnation and judgment, and beating one's breast to pray: "God be merciful to me a sinner". If each of us will pray,

according to the example of the Publican, with a broken heart and humble spirit, undoubtedly, we will receive great mercy from the One to whom all hearts are open: the Lord opens to us the door of repentance, will lead us into the holy and redemptive days of the Holy Forty Day Fast, will enable us by His grace to bring us to true repentance that we may receive complete remission and forgiveness.

From: *S. V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers.*
Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © 2002.

Anointing at Vigil

At the All-Night Vigil on Saturday evening, it is the practice of the Church to anoint the worshippers with oil blessed for the purpose at the Litia. Although a Litia (blessing of five loaves, wheat, wine, and oil) is appointed for every Vigil, it is customarily omitted Saturday night in the interest of time.

Our custom at St. Maximus is to anoint those present, even if Litia is not served. After the Gospel reading, the people come to venerate the Gospel, an icon of Christ the living Word and the account of His life and teaching. Having venerated the Gospel book, they approach the priest with hands held for a blessing, and the priest anoints them.

We use various blessed oils. The last two weeks, we have used oil from the myrrh-streaming head of the Kiev Caves Lavra. We also frequently use oil blessed on the relics of St. Herman, oil blessed in Christ's tomb, and oil blessed at Holy Archangels Monastery. We also have a small vial of myrrh from a myrrh-streaming icon of the Theotokos, and oil blessed on the relics of other saints. Those who come with faith to partake of the anointing receive a blessing in accordance with their faith and need. Non-Orthodox Christians may partake.

Preparation for Lent

The Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee begins the "Week of Proclamation" in the Church. The liturgical book of services for the Fast, the *Triodion*, is opened, and we begin to ready ourselves for the contest.

To get the most spiritual benefit out of the Great Fast, we need to give some thoughtful prayer to the matter of how we shall keep the Fast, particularly in the following areas: private prayer, corporate prayer and worship at the Church services, almsgiving, fasting, and spiritual reading. We should also consider how we can cut back on busy schedules to make time to cultivate repentance and offer ourselves wholeheartedly to God without being hindered by needless distractions.

We cannot expect to keep the Fast with great benefit in most cases if we only attend the Sunday Liturgy. Plenty of opportunity is given to pray with

the Church in the Church in the spirit of the Fast's "bright sadness." All the faithful are encouraged to take advantage of the weekday services.

Plan now: everyone if at all possible must attend Forgiveness Vespers (Feb 26); everyone should attend at least one or two of the four evenings of the Great Canon of St. Andrew (a different part each night) the first week of the Fast (Feb 27-March 1) to get the Fast started in the right spirit. Everyone is urged to attend Saturday evening Vigils (or at least the Matins portion, 5:45-7:00 p.m.) where the hymns expounding the meaning of day are sung. Everyone is encouraged to attend at least a couple weekday Presanctified Liturgies during the course of the Fast as well as a weekday Matins or Vespers now and again. It goes without saying that we should set aside as much of Holy Week (April 8-15) as possible to attend in the incomparably beautiful services before Pascha.

Besides the Scriptures (which we should be reading as a matter of course), choose a spiritual (Orthodox) book that will nourish your soul, aid you in the spiritual struggle, and move you to seek God during the Fast. Your priest will recommend one to you if you do not know what to read.

Consider how and when you will pray: what prayers? what psalms? what time of day? with how many prostrations?

Consider your almsgiving. The logic of the Fast is to eat less and more cheaply so that what you save may be given to the poor. How may we approximate this? How shall we give, and where?

It is time for us now to consider the specifics of how we shall keep the Fast. The Church gives us the next three weeks to plan and prepare.

Remember the goal of all this: to know Christ, to see Him as He is, and to be filled with a greater measure of His Spirit, to become God's children in character and not only in name.

Please consult your priest or father-confessor if you have any questions about the Fast.

Keeping Vigil During Great Lent

In the preparatory weeks leading up to Great Lent and then throughout the Fast itself, the Saturday evening Vigil in preparation for Divine Liturgy and Holy Communion takes on the tone of the season. Not only do we hear the Triodion canon on the theme of the week instructing and exhorting us, and the hymns sung throughout the service relating to that theme, but we also sing hymns for the season of the Fast which set the tone for the Fast. Many of us look forward to them each year, and heaving them, we are brought quickly into the spirit of preparation for the Fast and into the Fast itself.

One of these hymns is sung only three Sundays, from Prodigal Son to Forgiveness Sunday: Psalm 136, known by its opening line "By the Waters of Babylon". This is sung during Matins right after Psalm 118 and before the Evlogitaria ("Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes..."). It is the

lament of the Jewish people in captivity in Babylon, longing for their true home, Jerusalem and the promised land. We as the spiritual Israel sing this Psalm as we find ourselves exiled from Paradise by our sins but seeking to return there to our true home.

Perhaps the most characteristic hymn setting the tone for the seasons comes right after the Gospel reading and Psalm 50 (which Psalm we customarily omit on Saturday evenings). "Open to me the doors of repentance, O Lifegiver.." we sing, slowly, reflectively, as we acknowledge the mess we have made of our lives through our sloth and sin, and looking to Christ in hope to deliver us from it.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Open to me the doors of repentance of Life-Giver, for my spirit riseth early to pray towards Thy holy temple, bearing the temple of my body all defiled; but, in Thy compassion, purify me by the lovingkindness of Thy mercy.

Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Lead me on the paths of salvation, O Mother of God, for I have profaned my soul with shameful sins and have wasted my life in laziness; but, by thine intercessions, deliver me from all impurity.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy, and according to the multitude of Thy compassions blot out my transgressions.

When I think of the many evil things I have done, wretch that I am, I tremble at the fearful day of judgment. But, trusting in Thy loving-kindness, like David I cry to Thee: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.

As we sang this hymn for the first time last night, I was glad for all those who had come to sing it with me. I also thought about all those who were not present to hear it or sing it, some of whom have rarely if ever heard it sung in its proper context and thus do not have the association of the Fast with this hymn. Even before I was ordained, I could not imagine Great Lent without this hymn. I certainly need it each year, and I anticipate the singing of it anew each year. Thus I could not help but feel a tinge of sadness for those who, no doubt for excellent and honorable reasons, were not present to embark upon the lenten journey borne on the back of this powerful hymn.

The Church offers us all the help we need for our spiritual journey back to Paradise, but neither She nor our Lord forces us to make use of those helps. To the degree that any of us are weak or feeble or ill in faith is the degree to which we are not fully appropriating the means of help offered to us. God grant that we all may make fuller use of those means and enter into a state of greater health and strength in our faith.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!