

The Confessor's Tongue for February 12, A. D. 2012

Thirty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost: Prodigal Son, St. Meletios of Antioch

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 12: St. Meletios, St. Alexis

Saint Meletius was born in Armenian Melitene and was elected Bishop of Sebaste in about 357. In consequence of the volatile spirit of the Sebastians, the gentle shepherd left his cathedra for the hermetical life in Syrian Berea. From here, as "the pillar of Orthodoxy and advocate of piety", he soon was called by the Emperor in Antioch for the defense of Orthodoxy against the Arians. Having taken the Antiochian cathedra, Saint Meletius zealously accused the Arians in their errors and with their accusations has so turned them against themselves, that more than once by their intrigues and slander, they were removed from Antioch. In 381 Saint Meletius presided at the Second Ecumenical Council. "Having accomplished ascetical efforts of piety, and having finished the flow of goodness, and having piously taught the true faith", Saint Meletius died in peace during the Council. His relics were translated from Constantinople to Antioch.

Saint Alexis was born into a boyar family and was named Eleutherius. He was born in Moscow in 1293 and from his early youth studied reading and writing, which he successfully learned. "God chose Saint Alexis before his youth to be a shepherd of His flock and a great teacher" and when he was 12 years old, God was pleased to reveal to him a mysterious vision of his future high service. Since then the adolescent became thoughtful, silent, and abandoned child's play and with more searching began to read the divine books. His leaning to soul-saving reading and prayer grew in him with each passing year, and soon his most burning desire was to enter a monastery in order to completely enlighten himself with God. When he was 20 years old he left the world without regret and went to the Moscow Theophany Monastery where he accepted monasticism, taking the name Alexis. Alexis remained at the Theophany Monastery for twenty years, exhausting himself with fasting and vigil, prayers and tears, studying Hagiography, perfecting himself and deepening his spiritual life. Metropolitan Theognostes, learning about Alexis and valuing his piety and great gifts, asked him to join him, charging him with the management of church affairs in the rank of deputy to the Metropolitan. In 1352 he was consecrated Bishop of Vladimir on the Kliasma. Having become Metropolitan in 1354, Saint Alexis with indefatigable zealotry became involved in church affairs. He built a few monasteries (see the Moscow and Nizhni Novgorod diocese). The glory of his holy life reached the distant capital of the Tartar khan. The wife of the Khan Khanibek, Taidula, fell into a serious illness and finally became blind. No medicines could restore her sight, and she decided to approach the hierarch Alexis, whom she heard was a holy man. At the

request of the Khan, the Hierarch arrived in his capital and healed his sick wife. The Khan and his healed wife presented Saint Alexis with rich gifts and let him return in honor to Moscow. Holy zeal for the good of the country forced Saint Alexis to undertake the same journey once again. His son Berdibek maliciously killed Khan Khanibek, and also killed his 12 brothers and began to demand heavy tribute from all the Russian princes. Saint Alexis undertook the difficult assignment of asking mercy from the Khan. He again went to the capital of the Khan and in the presence of Taidula, the mother of Berdibek, asked for the granting of mercy for the state and the Church.

The mind and extensive education, persistence and backbone, piety and strict life of Saint Alexis won him universal respect. Zealously caring for the piety of all his flock and teaching them the performance of Christian duties, the hierarch was the teacher and the peacemaker of the princes quarreling among themselves for their possessions.

The Holy Church glorifies him as "the nourisher of widows, and father to orphans, the helper of all those in grief, the comfort for those who sorrow, the shepherd and teacher for all who have gone astray", "the beauty of the church", "great wonderworker", "the luminary of all the Russian Metropolia", "the golden radiance of the Russian star".

Saint Alexis died on February 12, 1377. Saint Alexis left for posterity theological literature consisting of letters, lectures and translations. His translations from the Greek language and written gospels in his own hand are kept in the Moscow Chudov Monastery. The general church established the commemoration of the memory of Saint Alexis by the end of 1448. The relics of the Hierarch Alexis today openly repose in the Chudov Monastery founded by him in Moscow.

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

On this Sunday by means of a Gospel parable, from which it received its name and the very Sunday, the Holy Church, for the rousing of repentance for those who are bound by sinful habits, those who cannot and do not want to be freed from it, represents a disastrous condition of man, who is withdrawn from God; and for the consolation and encouragement of those who, being depressed by the consciousness of the weight of their sins, fall into hopelessness and despair, presents an image of repentance of the depraved son and the inexhaustible mercy of the Heavenly Father, Who accepts all sinners who repent. The deeply edifying Gospel Parable of the Prodigal Son with special clarity shows to what an awful degree the flesh prevails over the spirit, and to what sensuality the soul can reach over the highest aspirations, and to what an unfathomable

abyss of sin a man may be thrown into, who submits to self will, who takes a great interest in carnal desires, who overthrows in himself the good yoke of the law of God, and who submits to an unrestrained will in sensual pleasures. The true joy of life consists only in the beneficial union with God. The distance from this union serves as the source of all possible troubles and humiliations.

However these troubles are not continual for that sinner, who has not yet completely deadened his conscience, who has not reached complete despair in the persistence and hardness in his sins, and finally has not fallen under the authority of the devil. The love of the Heavenly Father does not leave him and then, when he wanders on the path of vice, not thinking about returning under his father's roof, when he slumbers in the embrace of vanity and of earthly sweetness, not noticing the abysses under him, which his passions attract. The grace of God does not cease to call upon him: that voice of love and mercy, that by fear of foreboding and threats, through the mouths of the holy prophets and apostles, touching and softening the heart by its many diverse benefactions, that by striking with tribulations and calamities, that awaking his conscience by especially significant events and meetings, that shaking all his being by such occurrences in life which involuntarily awakens his conscience, that sobers his mind, that strikes his heart with the fear of God, fear of judgment and of torture. The Lord Jesus Christ, according to his own promise, stands before the doors of his heart and knocks, that he opens the door to Him and receives Him into the room of his soul. And here the sinner wakes up from his spiritual slumber and from there comes to the idea that his unique rest is in God.

To strengthen us all in this saving idea in order to wake all of us from the spiritual drowsiness in which all of us are more or less immersed during the usual course of our life, our habitual pleasures and entertainments, our many anxious cares of everyday life, thoughtlessly breaking the commandments of God and carelessly continuing in our sinful ways, not suspecting that this path can result in our death, the Holy Church also changes the chants for this day into one continuous repentant prayer of our souls crying out to the Lord.... From: *S. V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers*. Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © 2002.

Preparation for Lent

Having spent some valuable time with him this past week, I should like to relay to you Fr. Hopko's recommendation for spiritual reading, as we prepare for Great Lent and ponder what we may undertake to read during it.

First, the Holy Scriptures must be the first source to which we turn. As St. John Chrysostom says, the cause of all our evils is our not knowing [and doing!] the Scriptures. A simple program of reading each day one chapter from the Gospels and two chapters from

the rest of the New Testament will get us through the whole NT in 90 days. Think how much better off your mind, your thoughts, your soul would be would you faithfully do just this four times a year!

Second, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. This classic work may be read a page or two at a time, and when we finish, we may start it again. This should be part of every serious Orthodox Christian's personal library and in regular use. Fr. Hopko contends that the 38 sayings of St. Antony the Great, with which the book opens, contain everything we need for practical spiritual living. I agree, which is why we have offered twice now over the years commentary on those sayings of Antony.

Third, St. Ignatius Branchaninov's work *The Arena*, although addressed to nineteenth century Russian monks is essential for us too. It begins by emphasizing the centrality to all Christians of Christ's commands in the Gospel (another reason to read the Gospels daily!) and offers much other instruction in how to live an authentic Christian life in a world which offers many frauds and fakes.

Fourth, he recommends C.S. Lewis' book *The Abolition of Man* to help us understand our current malaise and how we got here.

First Saying of St. Antony

When the holy Abba Antony lived in the desert, he was beset by *accidie* [sloth, lethargy, depression, lassitude], and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, "Lord, I want to be saved, but these thoughts to not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?" A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Antony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct and reassure him. He heard the angel saying to him, "Do this and you will be saved." At these words, Antony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved.

Short Commentary: To sum up the answer to the question how we may be saved: do your work, say your prayers. That is all that there is to it! Do your work, say your prayers. We may understand hereby that our secular jobs play an important role in our salvation. Do your work. Do it well. Do it for Christ's sake. Pray. Pray before work, pray during work, pray after work. Alternate your prayer with your work, giving thanks to God for both and asking His blessing on your work and all those you encounter.

Upcoming Events 2012

- 26 February, 6:00 p.m. Forgiveness Vespers: everyone expected to attend!
- 27 February — 3 March Clean Week, Great Canon, First Presanctified Liturgy of the Fast.
- 8 April Palm Sunday
- 9 April — 14 April Great and Holy Week
- 15 April Pascha, the Feast of Feasts

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!