

The Confessor's Tongue for July 30, A. D. 2017

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: Apostles of the 70 Silas & Silvanus

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 Dormition Fast

The Dormition fast was established as preceding the great feasts of the Transfiguration of the Lord and of the Dormition of the Mother of God. It lasts two weeks—from August 1 - 14.

The Dormition Fast comes down to us from the early days of Christianity.

We find a clear reference to the Dormition fast in a conversation of Leo the Great from around the year 450 A.D. "The Church fasts are situated in the year in such a way that a special abstinence is prescribed for each time. Thus, for spring there is the spring fast—the Forty Days [Great Lent;] for summer there is the summer fast... [the Apostles' fast]; for autumn there is the autumn fast, in the seventh month [Dormition fast]; for winter there is the winter fast [Nativity fast]."

St. Symeon of Thessalonica writes that, "The fast in August [Dormition fast] was established in honor of the Mother of God the Word; Who, foreknowing Her repose, ascetically labored and fasted for us as always, although She was holy and immaculate, and had no need for fasting. Thus, She especially prayed for us in preparation for being transported from this life to the future life, when Her blessed soul would be united through the Divine spirit with Her Son. Therefore, we also should fast and praise Her, emulating Her life, urging Her thereby to pray for us. Some, by the way, say that this fast was instituted on the occasion of two feasts—the Transfiguration and the Dormition. I also consider it necessary to remember these two feasts—one which gives us light, and the other which is merciful to us and intercedes for us."

The Dormition fast is not as strict as the Great Fast, but it is stricter than the Apostle's and Nativity fasts.

On Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays of the Dormition fast, the Church rubrics prescribe *xerophagy*, that is, the strictest fast of uncooked food (without oil); on Tuesdays and Thursdays, "with cooked food, but with no oil"; on Saturdays and Sundays wine and oil are allowed.

Until the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, when grapes and apples are blessed in the churches, the Church requires that we abstain from these fruits. According to the tradition of the holy fathers, "If one of the brethren should eat the grapes before the feast, then let him be forbidden for obedience's sake to taste of the grapes during the entire month of August." [This is not something I am aware of being practiced in the United States. I presume it applies to the fruits one is growing oneself as harvest approaches. Fr. J]

On the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, the Church rubrics allow fish. After that day, on

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, the fruits of the new harvest would always be included in the meals.

The spiritual fast is closely united with the bodily, just as our soul is united with the body, penetrates it, enlivens it, and makes one united whole with it, as the soul and body make one living human being.

Therefore, in fasting bodily we must at the same time fast spiritually: "Brothers, in fasting bodily let us also fast spiritually, severing all union with unrighteousness," the Holy Church enjoins us.

The main thing in fasting bodily is restraint from abundant, tasty and sweet foods; the main thing in fasting spiritually is restraint from passionate, sinful movements that indulge our sensual inclinations and vices. The former is renunciation of the more nourishing foods for fasting food, which is less nourishing; the latter is the renunciation of our favorite sins for exercise in the virtues which oppose them.

The essence of the fast is expressed in the following Church hymn: "If you fast from food, my soul, but are not purified of the passions, in vain do we comfort ourselves by not eating. For if the fast does not bring correction, then it will be hateful to God as false, and you will be like unto the evil demons, who never eat."

The Great Fast and the Dormition Fast are particularly strict with regard to entertainment—in Imperial Russia even civil law forbade public masquerades and shows during these fasts.

The Dormition Fast begins on the feast of the "Procession of the Wood of the Life-Giving Cross of the Lord."

In the Russian Orthodox Church, this feast was linked with the remembrance of the Baptism of Russia in 988.

On this day, a feast was established of the All-Merciful Savior Christ God, and of the Most Pure Virgin, in honor of the victory of Grand Prince Andrei Bogolubsky over the Volga Bulgars, and of the Greek Emperor Michael over the Saracens.

According to Orthodox Church tradition, on this day the Cross is venerated and a lesser blessing of the waters is served.

Allegories from Athos, Part Three

Why Walk?

Fr. Justin Frederick

If physical walking provides a metaphor for the Christian's spiritual life in Christ, then attentive, purposeful walking on a pilgrimage promises insight and blessing. Walking, however, takes time and effort. Modern man, used to speed, convenience, physical ease, and quick changes in scenery and environment finds this initially difficult. Why spend three hours walking the six miles from Karyes to Vatopedi Monastery on the old foot path when you could drive and be there in thirty minutes without

sweat or sore feet—or dropping and losing your water-skin on the way as I did?

“Sensory overload” is largely a modern phenomenon first noticed at the start of the twentieth century with the growing density of cities and the concentration there of sights and sounds. Since then with the proliferation of radio, television, movies, recorded music, and manufactured images bombarding man’s senses at almost all times, it has only grown worse. Unless carefully guarded, the senses convey far more data to the brain than it can process, causing stress and anxiety, inability to concentrate, irritability, overexcitement, inability to complete tasks among other things.

Pilgrimage on foot offers a departure from the realm of overstimulation and a reduction of the stimulation of the senses to a level normal to the natural world. With the senses less bombarded by impressions from the material world, the soul becomes freer to ponder deeper things, to become more aware of itself in the presence of God. Walking on pilgrimage allows this needed sensory decompression to take place.

The pilgrim typically arrives on Athos by boat. At the modest port of Daphni on the southwestern side of the Athonite peninsula, he disembarks and takes a bus crowded with pilgrims up and over the steep spine of the Athonite peninsula down to Karyes, the administrative center of the mountain. The distance is not far, perhaps three miles at most, but it is steep. We spotted a couple adventuresome pilgrims walking the route, but we did not attempt it. We took the bus.

Karyes has the appearance of a medieval stone village that has reluctantly made room for the automobile. The main street boasts a number of shops selling food, books, liturgical items, clothing, prayer ropes, incense, and the like, along with a post office, a medical clinic, a bakery, and a police station. The administrative offices for the mountain are there. Next to them stands the Protaton Church which houses the wonderworking icon of the Theotokos “Axion Estin” (“Meet it is”). Clustered around the main street are representation houses for each of the twenty monasteries and other buildings. During the day, Karyes bustles with pilgrims, lay workers, and monks there on business. Here one may catch a ride to many destinations. Here, one may visit Koutloumousiou Monastery, St. Andrew’s Skete, and Panagouda Hermitage where St. Paisios lived. Here, too, one may strike out on foot by the ancient paths to any monastery on the mountain.

Choosing to hike the six miles (ten kilometers) to Vatopedi Monastery, we found the beginning of the way and set out. Quickly we left the bustle of Kayres behind. Stillness and peace closed in. The only noises to be heard were those of nature, of our walking, and occasionally, of our voices. Insects buzzed, leaves rustled, birds sang. Our feet sounded on dirt, on rock, on grass. The straps of our backpacks creaked. Labored breathing could be heard on steep ascents. Water tinkled in streams or gurgled through pipes

laid along the ground to supply monastic dwellings. We walked under the chestnut trees, which flourish on the mountain. Along the path wildflowers bloomed in abundance. The spring sun shone, lighting our way and warming the air without overheating it. We passed intersections with other paths heading to other places. Often we saw those other places: hermitages, sketes, monasteries.

Whatever the sight, because of the easy measure pace of our walking, we had time to see it, register it, study it, reflect on who chose to build it long ago, who had worked out their salvation there over the centuries, and who now lived there. If the building was neglected, abandoned, or falling into ruin, we wondered who last lived there and why monastic life in that place had ceased, and whether it would be repaired and again inhabited or would fall into ruin. We had time to ponder the attractions of each setting. We could stop for a longer look, if we wished, or to take pictures.

Despite an abundance of beauty to take in, it did not overload the senses. Unlike the overwhelming rush of sights from a car at sixty miles an hour, the procession of things to see was slow, measured, manageable. Unlike the swift cutting from one image to another in a modern move trailer or music video, objects could linger before our eyes for as long as it took to take them in and appreciate them. All the senses were in play. We could feel the breeze, smell the air, taste the water, feel the ground under our feet, and hear the quiet. All this, rather than overloading the senses, gave us the context of what we were seeing and allowed us to process it.

How can a pilgrim properly appreciate three or four venerable monasteries built a thousand years ago and inhabited continuously since when visiting them by car on a single day? He cannot. But if he walks, he can reflect on where he has been, anticipate where he is going, appreciate the effort taken to reach his destination, receive well-earned hospitality, attend services there, venerate the relics, talk to the monks, eat with them, spend the night, and taste something of the life in a venerable monastery. Walking the courtyard, standing in church, and visiting the ossuary, the pilgrim may ponder those who in centuries past stood in the same places. He may feel the connection with them as his brothers in the faith who have gone on before him. He may formulate questions about their lives, the history of the monastery and its practices, and about his own life—questions he would scarcely have had time to ask if he had not taken the time to go on foot.

Upcoming Events 2017

1-14 August Dormition Fast
6 August Feast of the Transfiguration
13 August Summer Feast of St. Maximus
15 August Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos
24 September Annual Meeting

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!