



with the charism of discerning truth, heresy, and the spirits. They are tasked with deciding matters of the faith in Local and Ecumenical Councils under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We also have ascetics/monastics in the Orthodox Church who through spiritual struggle with the flesh and with demons, may become deified and wage spiritual warfare at a much higher/different level. In our Church History course, the major battles for the faith as exemplified in the Ecumenical Councils were primarily fought by our hierarchs in council. Monastics seemed to play a minor supporting role in most cases according to Fr. Meyendorff's view of history.

Being a hierarch or gifted monk is no guarantee of Orthodoxy in turbulent times as we have seen. We have read about truly Orthodox bishops meeting in Local Orthodox and Ecumenical councils as well as misguided or truly heretical bishops pronouncing doctrines and rulings in false councils as well. We have seen ascetics on both sides of many heresies, perhaps the most prominent mistaken one being the support in Egypt for the monophysite heresy as they, in their simple ways of thinking, felt that St. Cyril of Alexandria's doctrines were under attack. Because of the shifting policies and definitions of the faith by various rulers and bishops throughout the contentious 4th to 7th centuries, Fr. Meyendorff felt that the local populace, particularly in Egypt, considered the monastics more trustworthy than the hierarchs. So being an ordained bishop given the chrism of spiritual discernment, or a monk with his life focused on the Lord Jesus was no guarantee of Orthodoxy. Rather it was the personal faithfulness of the hierarch or monastic to the Scriptures, the tradition of the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, and to the statements of faith and decisions of the previous Local and Ecumenical Orthodox Councils which confirmed the true Orthodoxy of the individual hierarch or monk, and not their status as being either hierarch or monk.

In the seventh century, when the light of Orthodoxy was waning severely throughout the Eastern half of the empire, beaten down by a series of heresies and threats of barbarian invasions, historically from the Persians and now, even more menacing, from the Muslims, there arose a champion of Orthodoxy, a well educated, thoughtful, discerning young government official, who recognized the inherent danger caused by the Emperor's and

his Patriarchs' attempt to unify the Roman Empire' religiously divided peoples through monothelism--a more subtle form of the heresy of monophysitism. With Orthodox support and fellowship so decimated, he fled from Constantinople just across the Bosphorus to the Chrysopolis Monastery, to become a monk and later that great defender of the faith, St. Maximus the Confessor. He was a hero of the faith not only for his times, but having grown into the fullness of the image of Christ through righteousness, through an uncompromising stance and defense of the truth, through persecution, through inhuman torture and mutilation, and through exile, he has provided us with a nearly perfect example, an icon, of what it means to be a faithful Christian in godless times. Like St. Polycarp, St. Ignatius, St. Athanasius, and St. Cyril of Alexandria before him, St. Photios, St. Mark of Ephesus, St. Gregory Palamas, and St. Philaret of New York (in our own era) after him, St. Maximus stood firm, his face turned firmly towards his "Jerusalem" and "cross." He yielded no ground to the enemy and almost single-handedly in the East preserved the Orthodox faith in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. But what is surely not possible for man is certainly possible with God, Who raised up this confessor not only for those in the mid-seventh century, but also for us, in our day, and for the days of the Antichrist which lie ahead of us, to give us consolation, a path to follow, to show us what is possible through faith in Christ Jesus and faithfulness to His Church.

Although Fr.'s Meyendorff, Louth, and Thornton mention St. Maximus to a degree, their writings are insufficient to gain a true understanding of this man. Consequently I have turned primarily to a supplemental text for our course: Fr. Christopher Birchall's ***The Life of Our Holy Father Maximus the Confessor***, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA, 1982, as well as Joseph P. Farrell (translator), ***The Disputation with Pyrrhus of our Father among the Saints Maximus the Confessor***, (presumably from St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, but unlisted in my copy) which records a prolonged exchange between heretical Patriarch and faithful monk.

There are a couple of reasons I have chosen to write about St. Maximus. First, his general approach to defending the faith is a great role model, one used by many Fathers, Martyrs, and Confessors of the

Orthodox Church. Secondly, because his times were not so different from our times, we can gain insight and consolation from his battles for our own. He struggled with monophysitism/monothelitism, with almost the whole Eastern Roman Empire against him. We struggle with ecumenism which has infected and corrupted both eastern and western formerly Orthodox territories, as well as spread into the New World and other areas of the globe where Orthodox peoples migrated or Orthodox missionaries evangelized. Just as ignorance and political opportunism reigned in the 7th century Roman Empire, so do political opportunism and the lack of sound doctrine endure in our world. There are great lessons to be learned here from St. Maximus--for our world, for our Three Hierarchs Orthodox Theological Institute, and for us personally.

### **Pertinent Life of St. Maximus the Confessor<sup>1</sup>**

St. Maximus was born in the capital the New Rome, Constantinople, circa AD 580. His parents were illustrious citizens of the aristocracy and pious Orthodox Christians who provided the young Maximus with a comprehensive secular education including a thorough study of philosophy and theology. Moreover, although a layman, but because of his renown wisdom, the Emperor Heraclius forced him to become his first secretary as well as one of his counselors. Although he was essentially forced to accept this position, his love for his fellow man was reflected in turn by his being loved and respected by those at the Imperial Court. So early on we see Maximus' love of God and love of man being expressed to all in his work for the Emperor. His Christian witness to others was a constant part of his life.

When the monothelite heresy swept over the capitol and the Royal Court, Saint Sophronius Patriarch of Jerusalem was one of the few to oppose it, but because it corrupted so many in the royal palace, St. Maximus now in his early 30s, fearing he would be corrupted as well, fled the palace around AD 614 for the Monastery of Chrysopolis just across the Bosphorus to the east. There he became a monk and a few years later the abbot. For the next 24 years, this thoughtful scholar, pious and righteous before men, who, fearing God and having feared the corruptive influence of the theologically blind men around him, took up the monastic habit and

grew quietly in stature before God and men. These were years of important preparation. A great foundation of learning, wisdom, monastic discipline, and asceticism was laid in the soul of this humble, faithful man, a foundation that would prove to be of great benefit to the Church during the latter part of his life.

in A.D. 638 the heretical Patriarch of Constantinople Sergius persuaded the Emperor Heraclius to promulgate a confession of faith, probably totally written by Sergius, but signed by the Emperor, which promoted the Monothelite heresy of one will in Christ throughout the Empire. This confession of faith was known as the *Ekthesis*. All were to conform their theological beliefs to it. The Orthodox who resisted were persecuted and found themselves in a sea of heresy. Whereas the hierarchy in Constantinople was totally in the camp of the monothelites, Old Rome remained stalwart, even anathematizing the *Ekthesis* in a local council under Pope John IV in A.D. 642. Wishing to live with those of the true faith, and also because of the Muslim invasion of Palestine, St. Maximus left Constantinople for Rome via Africa. Along the way, strengthening his brethren, he taught faithful Orthodox Christians to defend and uphold the deposit given them from the Fathers, and to be wary of the deadly subtle sophistries of the monothelites both through letters to them and through his personal witness among them. During this sojourn in Africa St. Maximus went one-on-one in debate with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Pyrrhus, who had fled from the newly crowned Emperor Constans after it was suggested that he had participated in the poisoning of the former Emperor. This encounter is the subject of my second major reference, **The Disputation with Pyrrhus of our Father Among the Saints Maximus the Confessor**. St. Maximus also participated in the Local Council of Carthage in A.D. 646 which condemned monothelism. We shall look at this encounter a bit later.

After the new Emperor Constans II promulgated his own confession of faith the "*Typos*" in A.D. 648 under the influence of the heretical monothelite Patriarch of Constantinople Paul, the new Pope of Rome Martin, rejected it as opposed to Orthodoxy. By this time St. Maximus was in Rome and encouraged Pope Martin to call a local council, the "*Lateran*" Council, in

A.D. 649 in which the *Typos* and the former *Ekthesis* were anathematized. [This is the appropriate procedure for a layman who suspects a teaching is not Orthodox--to bring it to the attention of the hierarchs so that they may assess and determine it to be either orthodox or heresy.] Both St. Maximus and Pope Martin were to receive the wrath of the Emperor for this. They were arrested in Rome and hauled back to Constantinople in A.D. 653, where they were severely slandered, tortured, and eventually exiled later that same year, Pope Martin dying before he could be transferred, Maximus to Bizya in Thrace, because of their refusal to bow to the will of the Emperor and sign the *Typos*. One of his interrogators was Bishop Theodosius, whom we shall also discuss along with Pyrrhus later. A year after this in A.D. 654 Maximus was brought back for questioning and exiled again--this time to Perveris.

Five years later in A.D. 659 Maximus was brought back to Constantinople and interrogated for a third time. This time his unshakable Orthodox confession of faith and defense of the faith earned him the loss of his tongue and the loss of his right hand as just punishment, as it did for one of his two disciples (both named Anastasius, this one died as a result of his wounds). Yet, by the mercy of God and to the Glory of God, the Saint was able to speak even more clearly, both in thought and spoken word. He was exiled to the Western Caucasus in the town of Schemarum.

St. Maximus reposed in A.D. 661. *“After the Saint’s burial, three wondrous lights could be seen on his grave...Those three lights seen on the Saint’s grave were a clear sign that God’s holy one had taken up his abode in the radiant dwellings of the Most Holy Trinity, in the everlasting abodes in the Kingdom of Heaven, where he shines forth with the righteous like the sun, and enjoys the divine vision of the triune Light.”*<sup>2</sup> This wondrous sign was a Divine confirmation of the sanctity of the man, i.e., a Saint, and of the truth of the Orthodoxy of his faith confessed before God and man--the Lord Jesus Himself bearing witness of St. Maximus being one of His own.

In regard to how St. Maximus behaved in the presence of his accusers, persecutors, we have two exquisite examples--that of Patriarch Pyrrhus of

Constantinople in their confrontation in Africa, and that of Bishop Theodosius of Caesarea in Bythinia.

## **Two Encounters of St. Maximus with his Accusers**

In the first case, the confrontation of St. Maximus with Patriarch Pyrrhus in Carthage before a host of bishops, the Saint decimated the arguments of Pyrrhus by refuting them on the basis of the divine Scriptures and the testimonies/writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church, i.e., the received tradition. They jostled for many hours in a very measured battle of philosophical and theological ideas as recorded in ***The Disputation with Pyrrhus of our Father among the Saints Maximus the Confessor***. However, Pyrrhus was not attacked personally, his character not attacked as so often happens in our modern society, only his improper philosophical and theological ideas were taken to task. One of the better quotes I came across which set the tone and stage for the rest of the debate was the following: *“Thou didst advance this absurdity in thy writings as well, ‘proving’ it not with reason, but with authority. This only numbers thee with them that invoke the support of Heraclius in the matter, for thou didst also agree with his lawless and illegal mixture by confirming it with thy blessing.”*<sup>3</sup> In other words Pyrrhus did not thoroughly think things through logically and critically, but just fell in line with the Emperor’s decision.

Now despite being overcome by St. Maximus in debate/discussion, Pyrrhus was won over to Orthodoxy by St. Maximus’ understanding, logic, wisdom, and manner. As a result of this truly intellectual encounter Pyrrhus confessed his errors and was received back into the Orthodox Church. He subsequently wrote a book of confession of his reclaimed Orthodox faith. Pyrrhus’ statement at the end of the debate is revealing of his intellectual honesty in the face of St. Maximus unassailable wisdom as well as Pyrrhus’ own human weakness. Pyrrhus writes, *“Of a truth, the inquiry into operations hath shown that the one energy of Christ is absurd, however one may speak of it. I ask pardon for myself and my predecessor. We proposed and introduced these absurdities out of much ignorance. But I also implore thee to find a way that the absurd notion may be destroyed and yet the memory of my predecessor secured.”*<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, because of the slander and malice of the monothelites, and the exhortation of Olympias, Pyrrhus' orthodox conversion proved very short lived. Unlike St. Maximus who was unmovable in his Orthodoxy, Pyrrhus crumbled quickly when he came under attack from the Emperor and his own former heretical colleagues. He returned to the heresy from which he came and the anathema's of the Church subsequently fell on his head.

The second example is that of Bishop Theodosius of Caesarea, one of the interrogators appointed by the monothelite Emperor Peter to question St. Maximus and convert him to Monothelism after St. Maximus had been brought back to Constantinople in chains from Rome. This encounter, recorded on pages 17-25 of the aforementioned Life of Our Holy Father Maximus the Confessor, is a wonderful discussion of the monothelite heresy and its profound repercussions for the Orthodox faith, if accepted as correct. St. Maximus' answers are straight forward and to the point, challenging Bishop Theodosius' monophysite position. Here the best defense was a good offense on the part of the saint. Not only did he respect Theodosius and answer his questions specifically, but wanting to save the man just as much as refuting his monothelism, again he did not attack the hierarch, just refuted his mistaken beliefs. One major victory in this discussion was St. Maximus' confirmatory discussion of the validity of local orthodox councils not called by royal authority, as well as their canonical authority, since they are to be called twice a year. He not only won the argument, but won a friend with his divine wisdom and eloquence given by the Holy Spirit and presented in a spirit of love. Theodosius, moved to compunction, wept, bowed before St. Maximus (who also bowed), prayed with him, accepting the true teachings of the saint with love, and vowing to give the Emperor a full report. Unfortunately, Bishop Theodosius proved to be a cowardly man, fearing the Emperor more than the Lord Jesus. He reneged on his Orthodox confession, returning to the monothelites. Yet, on a subsequent interrogation of St. Maximus, having compassion to a degree for him, Bishop Theodosius prevented the interrogating mob from beating the saint to death after they were offended by the saint's Orthodox confession and exhortation.



So in both examples we have a saint, an Orthodox Christian, a monk, who fearing God and not man, in humility, in respect for the image of God that still existed in his enemies, confessed his Orthodox faith before man and God in a spirit of truth and love, using impeccable logic and reasoning (Godly wisdom given by the Holy Spirit), basing it on the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Holy Fathers, the proclamations of Local and Ecumenical Orthodox Councils, as well as his own understanding of the false philosophical systems of the pagan and neo-pagan Greeks. At the same time St. Maximus sought the salvation of his persecutors as well as the promulgation of the correct faith, true orthodoxy. Is this not the way to give witness under persecution, hating the sin, yet loving the sinner?

### **The Example of the Life and Times of St. Maximus the Confessor as a Role Model for our Times**

Now how does the example of St. Maximus the Confessor apply to us today? Pretty much in the same way as all our saintly heroes of the faith. If we look at the modern pan-heresy of Ecumenism there are a lot of parallels to those times:

First, all the ancient Patriarchs Seas have been swept up into the heresy of Ecumenism. The Roman Pope has fallen even further than the Patriarchs, introducing innumerable innovations over the past millenium. The more recent Popes have been leaders not only of ecumenism among various Christian heresies and schisms, but also among non-Christian monotheistic, and even pagan religions, as evidenced by their involvement in the Prayer meetings in Assisi sponsored by the Vatican. The Moscow Patriarchate has fallen under the control of the godless secular state of the old Soviet Union and modern Russia as the ancient Patriarchs of the East fell under the control of the Emperor and were subject to his favor as well as his wrath.

Secondly, the ecumenist orthodox play lip-service to the Holy Scriptures, to the Holy Fathers of the Church, to the inherited Tradition of the Church as passed down from the Apostles through the Bishops, to the authority of the Local and Ecumenical Orthodox Councils, i.e., the definitions,

pronouncements including anathemas, and canons recognized by the True Church.

Thirdly, both the Monothelites and the Ecumenists are interested in political unification for utilitarian purposes, in the former case to unify the Roman Empire internally so that the Emperor could focus his energies on fighting the external enemies, primarily Islam, and in the latter case to provide a “united” Christian witness at best, and at worse (so no one’s feelings might be hurt) a universal salvation/reconciliation (*apokatastasis*) of all religions/peoples whether believers or not.

Next, how does the witness of St. Maximus the Confessor fulfill the role model we implied in the beginning, that of an icon of the Orthodox Church. He was a man purified, illuminated, and divinized by his personal spiritual growth over a lifetime in the Orthodox Church--at home as a child; in the world as a young man in the monastery through asceticism, discipline, and prayer; through slander, persecution, torture, mutilation, exile growing into the fullness of the image of our Suffering Servant, Shepherd, and Savior our Lord Jesus Christ; by his fearless witness to Christ and the Orthodox faith before God and man; by his love for the truth and his love for his fellow man in reaching out to them humbly but firmly to secure their belief in the true faith. St. Maximus truly provides us an example to follow, even as Christ did for the Apostles, and the Apostles and St. Paul for their spiritual children. In our present dark times where the whole world appears to have gone over to heresy, and the end times of the Apocalypse are so much closer upon us, here is what St. Maximus shows us:

### **Lessons Learned from St. Maximus Useful for Individuals, Churches, Hierarchs, Monastics, and Theological Institutes**

1. Study well in your youth to understand the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church.

2. Grow up in and take advantage of an Orthodox environment--best provided by true Orthodox parents raising their children in the Church with understanding, love, and sacrifice, through the witness and teaching of the

Church, through deeper study and perhaps instruction from more advanced teachers (monasteries, Three Holy Hierarchs Orthodox Theological Institute).

3. Flee from the false shepherds and unite yourself to true Orthodox Bishops and peoples. Bring your friends and families with you.

4. Be prepared to give a witness to the faith you have been taught, handed down from the Apostles as understood through them, the Fathers of the Church, and the Holy Tradition to those who are still trapped in darkness.

5. Understand the culture around you and the false paths that others have fallen into--and save yourself first, lest you fall in heresy trying to help others.

6. Confess your faith before God and men when the opportunity presents itself, or especially when under persecution.

7. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

8. Witness to the truth in a calm, logical, intelligent manner, seeking not just to win the battle of words and ideas, but to win the hearts of your opponents.

9. Realize that those with false beliefs/delusions, can easily relapse into their former habits through persecution, through fellowship with former friends/associates, through bribery, through threats actual or perceived.

10. That the Lord will not test you beyond what you can endure, so be prepared to endure whatever you may face with faith and trust in our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ and in His mother the Ever-Virgin Mary the Theotokos.

11. Lastly, realize in these dark times that you may be the only witness for Christ and for the Orthodox truth in the circumstances that you find yourself.

As we look back at Ecumenism in the 20th century and now the 21st century, do we not have two wonderful examples of men who have walked in the footsteps of this Great Saint Maximus the Confessor--the humble unassuming hierarch of the Russian Church Outside of Russia Metropolitan Philaret, and from the monastic side Fr. Justin Popovitch. May there be many more!

<sup>1</sup> Taken primarily from **The Life of Our Holy Father Maximus the Confessor**, HTM, Boston, MA 1982

<sup>2</sup> **The Life of Our Holy Father Maximus the Confessor**, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA, 1982, p.48.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph P. Farrell (translator), **The Disputation with Pyrrhus of our Father among the Saints Maximus the Confessor**, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 72.