

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH  
JANUARY 21, 2024  
THE EXAMPLE OF ST MAXIMUS (commemorated today)

Today, January 21<sup>st</sup>, is the day our Orthodox Faith commemorates St. Maximus the Confessor from the 600's A.D. 1400 years ago and still very relevant today! He was from the higher classes of the Eastern Roman Empire and became a very high official in the capital, Constantinople. He was the Chief Secretary to the Emperor himself. And then one day he resigned and left his wealth and power behind to go off to the wilderness to become a hermit and pray. After three years as a hermit he moved into a monastery----he prayed, he studied, and he wrote theological books of which we still have many today. Books of great power and beauty, books that carefully taught our Orthodox Christian beliefs, books that call us to a very close walk with the Lord..... Dip into his books and you will see that he must have been a genius. For the most part, they are not light. Some are very difficult for those of us who are not of the genius type to understand! But they are profound and true. Maximus was blessed by God to become a very holy man and prayed and prayed and prayed. And he was brave....which will be the focus of what I will tell you about him.

During his lifetime a new heresy called Monothelism arose. This was a false teaching backed by the government for political purposes. To summarize it very briefly----- A large heretical movement that we often called Monophysitism has arisen in the 400's A.D. (It's still around and very large in the world and is the predominant church in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Armenia----4 parishes in our Cleveland area). It, without openly denying that Christ was human as well as divine, certainly downplayed His humanity. They were still going strong in some areas in the 600's A.D. when the new Moslem religion was taking the world by storm. Its warriors took Jerusalem and the Middle East, North Africa, and more---and they were pushing west further and further into the Christian Empire. The emperor thought that the religious disagreements in the Empire (between truly Orthodox and the Monophysites) weakened the Empire-----not what he wanted when he had to resist the Moslems. So he and some of the bishops tried to pull off a compromise to unite all the Empire more closely. Thus---Monothelism. This new teaching proclaimed Christ as definitely truly human as well as truly divine. But....it said He had no human will. It was hoped the Monophysites would accept this compromise and reunite with the main Church. That didn't really work out----and many in the Church simply wouldn't go along with it. St. Maximus, Pope Martin of Rome (back then, of course, Rome and the popes were Orthodox), and others said this compromise was heretical----if Jesus did not have a human will, then He was not really human. And if He was not really human, we could not be saved by Him.

Pope Martin was deposed, thrown in prison, and later died due to mistreatment there. The next big target was Maximus. He was well-known and influential---if he could be persuaded to go along with those in power, perhaps the compromise could work out-----and the empire be saved.

The assembled bishops said to Maximus standing before them---“We are the representatives of all the patriarchs and we are united in this belief you deny. We are the Church, and you need to submit to us.” Maximus replied-----“You are no longer the Church because you have changed our beliefs----if I am the only person left still true to Christ then I am the Church.” The bishops were greatly angered by his defiance and gave up on trying to persuade him. And so they had the old man flogged. Next, they cut off his right hand and then they cut out his tongue. He was sent away to travel as a prisoner to a far away place----the conditions of his exile were very poor, and he soon died. His falling asleep in Christ was in 662 A.D.

His bravery inspired many others and soon a reaction against the Monothelite heresy became strong. And almost 20 years after St. Maximus' death, the Sixth Ecumenical Council met in 680-681 and confirmed that Maximus was correct and all the church leaders that brought about his death were heretics. The Monothelite beliefs were condemned as heresy. And Christians continued to believe, as had been believed from the Apostles on, that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. This was all greatly due to the courage for the truth of an 82 year old man.

Hopefully, and by God's grace we will follow the example of St. Maximus and remain true to true Christianity, to the Orthodox beliefs handed down to us over 2000 years. Today, there are many people with no religion, many people with various non-Christian religions, many people of various non-Orthodox churches----they have either no belief or at least partly mistaken beliefs of various sorts. Only the Orthodox Faith has kept to the fullness of truth for all these centuries. And so we should be like St. Maximus and stay true to truth no matter what. And lately, the wonderful result has been that when we do that, people come flocking to join us in our Orthodox Faith..... But whether or not that continues to happen, we must stick to what is true.

Our beliefs are challenged in many ways. One way in particular I will look at a bit..... Today, the day before the anniversary of the full legalization of abortion in America on January 22, 1973, is Human Life Sunday. On this day we especially mourn for, and pray for, the millions of babies aborted since then; and we re-commit ourselves to the struggle to change things and outlaw abortion like our spiritual ancestors did in the Roman Empire many centuries ago.

The belief of our Church, based on the Bible and on Church Tradition, is simple to explain: A baby is a just as much a human being before it is born as it is after it is born. And so that baby

should not be killed before birth by abortion. At other times, I have taught about this in more detail---Bible quotes, what our Church Fathers say, etc. Today, just a reminder in a simple way of what we believe-----Babies are human beings. That is true just as much when they are in the womb as it is after they are born. Therefore, we should protect them, not kill them. And we should try to get our nation to agree----and to stop abortion.

Is abortion an unforgivable sin? Certainly not! When we repent of our sins, God forgives us---and that includes abortion. For some it is a very hard thing to get over and we do have help available for those who have had abortions and are having problems getting over it all. God forgives.

In conclusion, it was our Orthodox Church that changed the ancient world and outlawed abortion. How wonderful it will be if again, by working together with all who agree with us on this subject, that our nation could also be changed! And so, we must stay true to the truth handed down to us.

We will have short prayers (from our archdiocese) afterwards today---for the mothers, for the babies, for a change in our nation. And tonight there will be a pan-Orthodox prayer service for Human Life Sunday, sponsored by Zoe For Life, at 6 p.m. at St. Paul Church right here in North Royalton. I hope you will join me there!

May God answer our prayers for change! May God strengthen us to follow St. Maximus in his courageous stand for the truths of God. We know that he is now at the throne of God, worshipping and praying.... And we know he prays to God that we will be like him!