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The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin

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The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin

trans. and annotated by Boniface Ramsey, O.P.

Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of The Fathers in Translation

ed. by Walter J. Burghardt and Thomas Comerford Lawler,
No. 50

New York, NY/Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1989

xii + 388 pages

In E.C. Dargan's two-volume *A History of Preaching* Maximus, bishop of Turin, receives a bare paragraph; his homilies "are not of much intrinsic interest or values, but as samples from the times they are instructive." While not untrue, that is a somewhat jaundiced judgment, as this collection of his homilies makes evident. Students of Patristics and students of the history of preaching are grateful for this excellent translation and its handsome presentation.

Very little is known of Maximus. Partly a contemporary of Ambrose (340–397)—from whom he borrowed much sermonic material—we know only that he was bishop of Turin in northwest Italy and died somewhere between 408 and 423. From sermonic references a few other biographical hints emerge, and suggest that his ministry in Turin began about 390 and ended with his death.

While the editor represents the sparse biographical information fairly, he might have served the reader well with even a brief sketch of the times. For one thing, Rome was sacked in August 410 by Alaric and his Goths; there was a broad sense of foreboding building prior to this disaster and a huge wave of fear following it—not least in northern Italy where "barbarians" too were a menace (cf., for example, Robert B. Eno, S.S., "Christian Reaction to the Barbarian Invasions and the Sermons of Quodvultdeus", *Preaching in the Patristic Age*, ed. David G. Hunter, New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989, ch. 8). Maximus refers to these alarms in Sermons 18, 72, 82, 83, and 85. Secondly, paganism was still a strong influence and heresies were cause for careful instruction. Maximus rebukes pagan practices in Sermons 30 (the famous sermon "On the Eclipse of the Moon"), 63, 98, 105–108; it is suspected he refers to Arianism in such sermons as 6, 26, and 56, and to Docetism in Sermon 22. Thirdly, the liturgical year and liturgies were established but still fluid. Maximus is preoccupied with fasts (especially those of the Quadragesima, the 40 days); Ascension and Pentecost seem to be celebrated on the same day in Turin (Sermon 40); Saints Days are of great concern to him. A rough count reveals 19 sermons on Saints Days, 23 on dominical festivals, and 15 on Fast Days and Almsgiving. While the Notes to the sermons alert the reader to these dimensions, even summaries would put the homilies into their several contexts.

Apart from this omission, the editorial work is excellent. The foremost problem is to identify the authentic homilies, given Maximus' heavy use

of Ambrose in particular. Of 117 sermons 13 are placed in an appendix; while attributed to Maximus, six of the 13 are judged to be spurious, five doubtful, one is Jerome's, and one Basil of Caesarea's. In addition to 102 pages of Notes to the sermons, three indexes are supplied: biblical references, authors and sources, and a general topical index. An excellent, though brief, Introduction describes Maximus' homiletical style and intent.

Maximus emerges as a sturdy preacher, deeply committed to his largely rural parishioners, and very faithful to his pastoral responsibilities. The sermons often have a fragmentary quality (some, in fact, are clearly fragments) in that while they begin recognizably, they end abruptly. Still, there is striking continuity in his habit of continuing a sermon or theme by reviewing the previous sermon (e.g., "A few days ago, brethren, we spoke against those who think that the moon can be escorted from the heavens with magicians' incantations... ", Sermon 31, a sequel to Sermon 30, the "Eclipse of the Moon"). These sequels occur very frequently (e.g., 19-20, 26-28, 37-39A, 92-94, 95-96). Though partly thematic in method (e.g., Saints Days; the grace of Baptism, Sermon 13; almsgiving, Sermon 22A; on removing idols and pagan rites, Sermon 107), Maximus almost invariably practices the ancient homily method of commentary upon verses of Scripture according to a typological and allegorical hermeneutic. On the one hand, the contemporary reader can be impressed not only by the power of his images, but especially by the illuminating effect of the metaphors produced by allegory. Allegory, after all, is a discipline of metaphor-making! Paul's epistles are the breasts of the church (no. 9); Christ is a grape cluster (no. 10); heretics are owls: they love the dark and hate the light (no. 73); the woman at the well is the church (no. 22A). On the other hand, the contemporary reader will gasp at bizarre metaphors achieved from indiscriminate linking of texts: the stone that killed Goliath is Christ because Christ is "the stone which the builders rejected"; since "the head of a man is Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:3) the Baptist's severed head is Christ and thus the church, while his headless body is the Jews (no. 88)!

Maximus' aim as a preacher is so to teach and exhort that his hearers will increase in holiness, i.e., increase in virtue and good works. "I labor to convert you to good works" (no. 30); he supposes he too can become "a preacher of the Lord's virtues" (no. 78). Virtues, he says, "are wings to us, which raise us up from the low places of the earth to the heights of heaven, and by a kind of flight of the mind, snatch us from the darkness of the nether world and lead us to the pleasures of paradise" (no. 70). Faith is one of the chief virtues (cf. nos. 102-103); fasting is one of the chief means of nurturing virtues. The monastic model is thus a very strong influence (cf. no. 49), and martyrdom the ideal (cf. no. 4).

As is the case generally in Patristic writings, Maximus is both anti-semitic and anti-feminist. "We ought to avoid, though, the companionship not only of the pagans but also of the Jews, with whom even a conversation is a great contamination" (no. 63); of the two men in one bed (Luke 17:34), the one taken is the Christian people, the one left is the Jewish people (no.

19); of the two boats on the seashore (Luke 5) the boat Jesus enters (which is Simon's) is the "faithful Church" while the boat he spurns is "the faithless Synagogue" (no. 49). His anti-feminism is, in contemporary ears, brutal: "It is in the desert [the reference is to Jesus' temptation which Maximus parallels with Adam's temptation], then, that salvation is first restored to humankind—there where there are no rich foods, where there are no pleasures, where (what is the cause of every evil) there is also no woman. For Adam would have been able to remain unshaken among those pleasures of paradise had Eve not been in the same place with her diabolical snares. The desert, then, is fitting for salvation—there where there is no Eve to persuade, no woman to entice. Behold a remarkable thing: in paradise the devil contends with Adam, and in the desert the devil struggles with Christ; everywhere he lays a snare for man, everywhere he accosts him, but where he has found a woman he conquers, and where he has not found a woman he retires conquered" (no. 50A).

Maximus exudes a wonderful naive joy in the Scriptures. All sorts of discoveries are to be made there, and often these appear as he applies the device of comparison (e.g., Mary's womb and the tomb). With a kind of glee he notes that John the Baptist, as an OT figure, is born of an *old* woman while Jesus is born "from a woman in the flower of glowing youth" (no. 5); he marvels that what Gabriel *closed* (Zechariah's mouth) baby John *unlocked* (no. 6); he appreciates the appropriateness of Peter, who is the *foundation* of the church, healing a man's crippled *feet* (no. 9).

Beyond everything else Maximus is a pastor who loves his people. He chides them as a father ("I have no small complaint against a great number of you, brethren", (no. 63); he grieves over their lack of devotion ("I have discovered, brethren, that during my absence so few of you came to church, so very few of you were present... ", (no. 79); he warns them of enemies ("I think that all the heretics... are to be compared to foxes. Since they are unable to dwell in the house of the Lord, they set up conventicles for themselves, so to speak, like dark holes", (no. 41); he jollies them along ("We ought to exult, dearest brethren, because feasts follow upon feasts and joys are piled upon joys", (no. 101); he yearns for their growth and binds them into the church which washed them ("Beloved brethren... because it is clear... that Jesus Christ was not baptized for His own sake but for ours, we ought to take up the grace of His baptism in all haste and draw the blessing of consecration from the river Jordan, which He blessed, so that our sins might be drowned in the water in which His holiness was submerged", (no. 13). Gratifyingly, his times become parallels to our times, and we may learn from him about preaching to a church which is again an island in a sea of secularity and variant spirituality.