**SLIDE 1: The Life, Theological Struggles and Legacy of**

**St Maximus the Confessor**

**Life:**

**SLIDE 2:** St Maximus the Confessor was born in 580 near Constantinople. This is the zenith of the Byzantine Empire, when there were few enemies from outside of the empire, but one was on the horizon. The old city of Rome had fallen and diminished in its reach and worldly authority. **SLIDE 3:** Justinian the Great was emperor from 527-565. He was renowned for his Orthodoxy, his code of civil law, and beginning the building of Hagia Sophia.

This is also the time when there were two new threats to the Orthodoxy of the Church. **SLIDE 4:** Having condemned the heresy of Arianism over and over again, a new heresy was on the rise: Monotheletism. The other threat was the new religion of Islam that was about to rise in Arabia. Both of these things would have an impact on the life of St Maximus.

Maximus was an academic and had a rather privileged life in the bureaucracy of the time. He was a Secretary to Emperor Heraclius, who reigned from 610-641. In 614, having had enough of the heresy that was rampant within the higher echelons of the government, he retired to the monastery of Chrysopolis. **SLIDE 5:** During an invasion during the Byzantine-Sasanian War, and the subsequent invasion by the Persian power, he fled to Africa for a while. During the early years of his monasticism, he rose quickly through the ranks and became an Igumen in short order. (***Igumen*** is the title for the head of a [monastery](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Monastery), similar to [*abbot*](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Abbot). The term means "the one who is in charge," or "the leader" in Greek. An igumen is not necessarily a member of the [clergy](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Clergy).)

**SLIDE 6:** During that flight, and on subsequent visits to the West, he came into contact with those who were preserving the Orthodox faith. When I previously mentioned that the influence of Rome was waning, it was not to be inferred that the Church had lost its way. In fact, this is a golden time for the Church of Rome in terms of its forthrightness and adherence to the faith. (This is overly simplified, as several Roman popes of this era also aligned with the heretical party, though it was not as deeply rooted.) **SLIDE 7:** Conversely, Byzantine was fat and happy, and there was less care from the secular authorities about maintaining theological truths. Yes, the secular authorities used to understand their role as safeguarding the people as well as the Orthodoxy of the Church. This is where the symbol of the two-headed eagle gets its meaning.

That eagle had lost its head! Before we go further with the life and times of St Maximus, let us examine in a small way what the heresy of Monotheletism entails. We have just come through Monophysitism, or Arianism. This is the belief that Christ was a creature and not God, as the Father is fully God. This means that Christ, exalted as He is, is not divine. The implications, therefore, are that His sacrifice on the cross would not be enough to save humankind from since. If Jesus is a creature, he can only die for his own sins. Therefore, Arianism devolves into a sort of moralism. Jesus was a good guy, so we should be good as well. This is not salvific. Now with Montheletism, the question of Christ’s divinity is resolved, but another aspect of his person is attacked. The Thelos is the will. That part of the person that desires or wants something, and chooses accordingly. **SLIDE 8:** If we remember that St Athanasius said that “That which is not assumed cannot be redeemed,” then it follows that the human will must also be assumed be Christ (He must possess a human will) if it were to be healed as well. Without a human will having been assumed and redeemed by Christ, it can never choose to do the will of the Father. This is what we are called to do, to align our will with that of God out of freedom and desire. Should it not be free, it is not a will, but a compulsion, and therefore, devoid of love and relationship.

**SLIDE 9:** But by the year 630, three of the patriarchal thrones in the Orthodox East were occupied by Monothelites: Constantinople by Sergius, Antioch by Athanasius, and Alexandria by Cyrus. Jerusalem and Rome maintained the true faith alone at this time. With heretical teachers in positions of authority, it was difficult for the Orthodox adherents to teach the truth without persecution. Maximus again fled to the West, also going through Africa, where he is well received. Now, Africa in that time was a much more specific area than how we understand it today. Today we tend to mean the entire continent, while Roman civilization would have only meant that area under their rule, or the modern countries that border the Mediterranean. Remember, Augustine was the bishop of the African city of Hippo in modern Algeria.

He spent a significant amount of time in Alexandria, apparently unharried. He preached there from about 632-638. Then, the tide would go even further out for the Orthodox cause.

In 638, Patriarch Sergius and Emperor Heraclius published a decree concerning the Monothelite controversy. This was call the “Ekthesis tes pisteos” or “Exposition of Faith.: It is commonly referred to as the Ekthesis. This Imperial decree mandated all Christians to accept monotheletism as the true teaching of the Church (which of course it is not).

In the same year that this was promulgated, Patriarch Sergius died. And just 3 years later, Heraclius died as well. This, however, was not good news for the Orthodox camp. The next emperor of the Byzantine Empire, Constans II (who ruled from 642-668), was an open adherent of the Monothelite heresy. Coming to the Constantinopolitan throne was Pyrrhus, who was also convinces of the error.

While the great centers of the Church were falling, the situation further out was not the same. It is true to some degree that what we call the Oriental Orthodox Churches (such as the Coptics, Syriacs and Armenians) maintain the heresy, their statement on the matter is a little more nuanced. **SLIDE 10:** While the churches of Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch held that Christ did not have a human will, the Oriental Orthodox would say that the divine and human wills were fused to such a degree that they can be described as being one singular will. We will discuss the Oriental Orthodox Churches at another time, because the theology they are espousing is not necessarily the same as the Monothelites that we are dealing with in the Roman world. What we are dealing with is pure heresy that is damaging to the souls of the faithful. Thankfully, this heresy is not what won the day nor did it survive the Sixth Ecumenical Council of 680-681.

Continuing with the story of the smaller provinces, in 647 Monotheletism was condemned as heresy by an African Synod. This is one of the first times that a synod had the forthrightness to condemn this heresy, even in opposition to the Imperial authorities.

But these smaller movements were confronted by a new document that was released in 648. The Type of Constans, also called the Typos, was an edict that made it illegal to discuss in any manner the topic of Christ possessing either one or two wills. Emperor Constans II declared that the whole controversy was to be forgotten – "the scheme which existed before the strife arose shall be maintained, as it would have been if no such disputation had arisen." This did not solve the problem, of course.

**SLIDE 11:** In October of 649, St Maximus and his friend Pope Martin (also given the title of the Confessor) hold the Lateran Council, which was thoroughly Orthodox, as we understand it, in its teaching. 150 Western bishops were in attendance, as well as 37 bishops from the East. This was a bold move, but one borne out of piety and devotion. It did not escape the notice of the authorities, though Ss Maximus and Martin were free for a little while longer. In 654 the two holy men were arrested for this council’s decisions. After their trials, by a decidedly skewed Imperial court, Maximus was exiled to Thrace, before being eventually brought back to Constantinople. He was not brought back out of any sort of reconciliation, but to joyously suffer for his faith. At that time, he was tortured, had his tongue cut out, and his right hand cut off. This was an ancient way of saying that this person was punished and denied, that his teaching could no longer go out into the world, nor could he write the things he had previously been writing. It is a glorious thing for the saints to suffer so much in witness to the true faith. After these cruelties, Maximus was exiled to Skemarum in Scythia. His devotion was rewarded still by the Lord, as it had been revealed to him three years beforehand when he should repose (and therefore, urge in his repentance for his sins). St Maximus the Confessor, he was firm in his faith, bountiful in his monasticism, and a teacher for the Church throughout all the ages, died on August 13, 662.

**Writings**

**SLIDE 12:** Many writings of St Maximus the Great survive, despite the evilness that befell him for his confession. His works are sometimes doctrinal, sometimes spiritual, and sometimes engaging in exegesis of Scripture.

One place in which his works are most notably present is in that great spiritual guidebook, the Philokalia. The Philokalia is a collection of readings and texts about prayer and the spiritual life that centers on the practicing of the virtues and saintly living.

Some of his other writings include:

* *Quaestiones ad Thalassium (Questions to Thalassius)*—65 questions and answers on difficult passages of [Holy Scripture](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Holy_Scripture)
* *Ambigua*—an exegetical work on St. [Gregory the Theologian](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Gregory_the_Theologian) (329-390).
* Paraphrases of the works of [Dionysius the Areopagite](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Dionysius_the_Areopagite) (though this may be the work of John of Scythopolis, who wrote in the first half of the 6th century, some 100 years before Maximus)
* Several dogmatic treatises against the Monothelites
* *Liber Asceticus* (Book on Asceticism)
* *Capita de Caritate*
* *Mystagogia*—a mystical interpretation of the [Divine Liturgy](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Divine_Liturgy)

**Theological Legacy**

**SLIDE 13:**

The theology of St Maximus is true and an important part of the life of every Orthodox Christian. It is not an academic pursuit that the Church has developed a theological system, but so that salvation and redemption can be offered to the people of the Church. What we teach and what we do matter because they guide us on the path of salvation. The goal of life, the thing that happens when salvation is achieved is theosis. Theosis is becoming by grace what God is by nature, meaning that we are to become part of the body of Christ and live in joy and blessedness for all of eternity. Think of how the Monothelites would have us be simply moral creatures. That has temporal and passing rewards. But to know that Christ shares in our nature as much as we do, and that he is still God, offers a chance for the people of God to be grafted into the body of Christ. It must all begin with the redemptive life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, that is the entirety of what is necessary to achieve salvation. In a letter to his friend Thalassius, Letter number 22 of St Maximus’ writings, he writes: “Nothing in theosis is the product of human nature, for nature cannot comprehend God. It is only the mercy of God that has the capacity to endow theosis unto the existing... In theosis man (the image of God) becomes likened to God, he rejoices in all the plenitude that does not belong to him by nature, because the grace of the Spirit triumphs within him, and because God acts in him.”

These themes will be fleshed out more fully in the life, conflicts, and writings of the saints of the 13th and 14th centuries, which we will be studying in a few months. St Maximus’ devotion and Orthodox teaching were picked up and expanded by St Simeon the New Theologian, and St Gregory Palamas.

**Discussion Questions:**

**SLIDE 14:**

1. Why does it matter that Jesus Christ took on a human will, in addition to the Divine will?
2. What does it mean to be a Confessor, and how should this challenge our daily Christian lives?
3. What is the role of secular society and the decrees of governments in the life of the Church? If we must live in a society such as ours, where do we draw the line of governmental interference, or where do we open the gates for the synergy of the church and the state?
4. Should the Church ever allow something from outside of itself to determine the teachings of the Church? Does the answer change if we recall that the Church is the Body of Christ (because then the question would look like this: Should the body of Christ ever allow something from outside of itself to determine the its witness of itself?)
5. What are some steps, mundane or momentous, that put us on the path of salvation and urge us to theosis?
6. What other writings, whether St Maximus or not, are edifying in your spiritual struggles within the Orthodox Christian tradition?