

Repentance

and **CONFESSION**

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Confession is in decline and repentance is misapprehended. The decline and the misapprehension cannot be easily qualified, but they are unmistakable at least inasmuch as repentance and confession are considered to be no more than incidental practices in the life of the Church today. The “traditional” way of thinking about sin and forgiveness has collapsed among a growing number of Christians. This degeneration is often attributed to secularization. Yet secularization should not be seen, in a scapegoat fashion, as merely an external enemy. Secularism also acts from within the Church. Even those actively involved in Church life suffer from a formalism caused by established patterns of religious practice. There is a need to appeal to the deepening of repentance and confession as spiritual realities rather than their imposition as obligatory customs. It is only in a realization of the nature of sacramental life that repentance acquires its significance as a path of renewal and reconciliation in Christ.

The word for “confess” in Greek (εξομολογουμεναι, ομολογω) does not bear the contemporary meaning we think peculiar to it. The point is not of admitting, more or less reluctantly, a hitherto “unrecognized” sin, but an acceptance of and submission to the divine Logos (exomologesis) beyond and above nature and the human condition. It is this Logos – the Word of God – that humanity seeks to regain, or rather to commune with once again. To confess is not so much to recognize and expose a failure as to go forward and upward, to respond from within to the calling of God. Created in the image and likeness of God, human beings bear that image and likeness. In repenting, a person reflects and reacts to what lies before and beyond him.



Repentance is also a way of self-discovery: “Open to me the gates of repentance” we sing at Orthros during Lent. Metanoia is the gateway to oneself, to one’s fellowman, and to heaven. It leads inwards, but it also leads outwards by leading inwards. The world ceases to rotate around the self and begins to gravitate towards the other – the divine and the human other. Sin has the opposite effect. It blocks the way both inwards and outwards. To repent and to confess is to break out of this restriction, “to accept with joy,” in St. Isaac the Syrian’s words, “the humility and humiliation of nature,” to transcend and to recover oneself. The world thereupon ceases to rotate around “me” and begins to gravitate towards “the other,” centering on God. Then, everyone and everything no longer exists only for me but for the glory of God, in the joy of the Resurrection.

Repentance, therefore, is not a merely an incident or stage through which one passes and then leaves behind; rather it is an attitude which colors one’s whole life and for which, at the same time, one must struggle continually. It is a way of life, and as such a way of transfiguration, in which our heart and mind continuously receive illumination by the Holy Spirit. It is a continuous pathway, at least in this life, a perennial striving, an all-embracing motion and not merely an occasional emotion. Repentance is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit who transforms the heart of the human person, and not a fruit of individual effort or anguish.

Orthodox Christianity views repentance as a dynamic act of responsibility to God, but also to other people. It is not pining away in narcissistic self-reflection, even while implying self-knowledge and self-examination. Sin itself is a relational act – a break in the “I-Thou” relationship. Sin always concerns my relationship with another person.

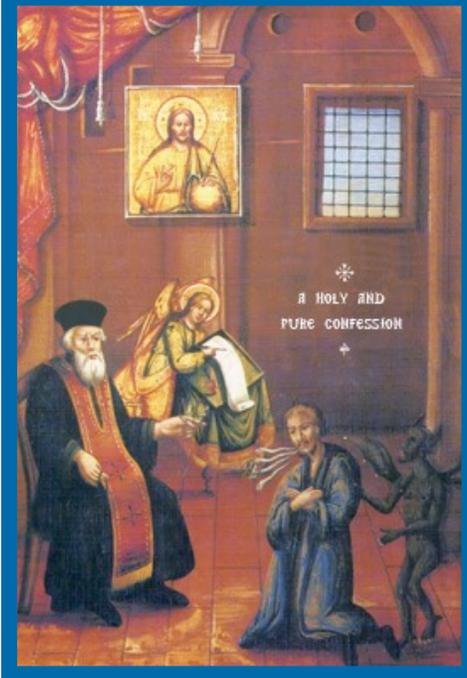
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When the prodigal son “came to himself” in the Gospel parable (Luke 15), he did so in relation to his father: “I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’” (verse 18). We repent before the face of God; and we repent in communion with others, in the Church. Repentance in the early Church was in fact a solemn public act of reconciliation, through which a sinner was readmitted into the church community.

Even in Buddhism, monks regularly confess their sins publicly before Buddha and the congregation; the phenomenology is the same as in the Church, even if the theology or ideology is different. Sin and evil divides, repentance conciliates, and confession affirms the reconciliation. Outside the community, outside the Church, repentance would settle into guilty gloom, dulling the spirit or even driving to despair: metanoia turning into paranoia.

Confession, too, takes place within the Church. It is not a private procedure, a treatment of some guilt-ridden individual on an analyst’s couch. It is not based on an admission of guilt and certainly cannot be reduced to a feeling of guilt, of liability for conduct contrary to norms and laws which render a person subject to punishment. It is related to what is deepest in our human nature, to what constitutes our being and our relation with other human beings as well as with God. It is a sacrament - “the visible form of an invisible grace” (St. Augustine), re-establishing a bond of union between God and man, between man and man. This is why confession also takes place within prayer because it is in prayer that a personal relationship in all its intensity is realized both with God and the entire world. As such, confession and prayer are not merely technical terms but means and opportunities offered by the Church for overcoming sin and death. Repentance is indeed the cause and consequence of prayer, being the highest and the fullest foundation for prayer. “True prayer,” according to St. Anthony the Great, “is that in which one forgets that one is praying” and genuine repentance enables one to forget oneself and simply long for God,



who is present in the very depths of repentance. For it is ‘before Him alone that one sins’ (Psalm 50:3-4) - this is the personal or relational aspect of both sin and repentance. Repentance and confession as sacrament seals our change of direction from disruption to reconciliation.

In early Christian times the exhortation of James served as a foundation for the sacrament of repentance: ‘Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed’ (5:16). Confession was regarded as a form of repentance and regeneration (Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5; Acts 19:18). The actual ritual aspect of repentance was a direct result of such apostolic testimony, at first in the form of confession before the entire Church and, subsequently,

before a spiritual father. Nevertheless, the earliest order of confession is of relatively late origin (tenth century, and is ascribed to John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople. This text may well be the source of later Greek and Slavonic services of confession. The communal, sacramental aspect of confession was more apparent in the early Church when penance constituted a public act rather than an individual episode. It was only after the fourth century that private confession was more widely practiced. But even then penance did not have the legalistic and clericalized character which it acquired later. In fact, very few Church Fathers refer even to absolution as a formal procedure, although such silence does not necessarily mean that absolution in some form or other did not exist. It is the reduction of sin to a punishable legal crime, an act of law breaking inviting a penalty that is almost wholly absent in patristic literature. “Have you committed a sin?,” asks Saint John Chrysostom, “then enter the Church and repent of your sin ... For here is the Physician, not the judge; here one is not investigated but receives remission of sins.”

Unfortunately confession at times undermines and even replaces the genuine inner repentance of a Christian: people feel “entitled” to communion after confession. This contradicts the true nature of repentance. It is a result of the sacrament being narrowly and juridically reduced to “absolution.”

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Scholastic theology tended to transpose the concept of sin, repentance and forgiveness into a forensic idiom, and placed the emphasis on the power of the priest to absolve. In the Orthodox Church, the priest is seen as a witness of repentance and not a recipient of secrets, a detective of specific misdeeds. The “eye,” the “ear” of the priest is dissolved in the sacramental mystery. He is not a dispenser, a power-wielding, vindicating agent, an “authority.” Such a conception exteriorizes the function of the confessor and of confession which is an act of re-integration of the penitent and priest alike into the Body of Christ. The declaration “I, an unworthy priest, by the power given unto me, absolve you” is unknown in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is of later Latin origin and was adopted in some Russian liturgical books at the time of the domination of Russian Orthodox theology by Latin thought and practice. The idea served to bring confession into disrepute, turning it into a procedure of justification and exculpation in respect of particular punishable offenses. Forgiveness, absolution is the culmination of repentance, in response to sincerely felt compunction. It is not “administered” by the priest, or anybody else. It is a freely given grace of Christ and the Holy Spirit within the Church as the Body of Christ.

The most significant effect of confession is indeed due neither to the penitent nor to the priest, but to God who heals our infirmities and wounds. It is not a matter of a let-off, a clearance; it has the force of healing, of making the penitent whole. As such it is a gift from God which we must be open to receive and learn to receive: “Let us apply to ourselves the saving medicine of repentance; let us accept from God the repentance that heals us. For it is not we who offer it to Him, but He who bestows it upon us.” It is significant that the Greek for confession, *exomologesis*, implies not only confession but also thanksgiving (cf. Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21): “I shall confess/give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, and tell of all His wonders” (Psalm 9:1).

Then there is the fact that a cloud of guilt at times shrouds



the sacrament of confession. This is by no means a theoretical question, for guilt is part of the tragedy experienced by many people, whether in their personal lives or in the face of the appalling sufferings and misery - mental, physical, social - which afflict the world at large

today and for which we all share responsibility and guilt. But in the specific context of repentance and confession, guilt can be a highly misleading concept, largely fostered by Western thinking. It originates in a hypertrophied individualistic, self-regarding view of sin and salvation, and indeed of repentance with its attendant legalistically oriented penitential system. Orthodoxy always resisted legalism, whether in repentance or in confession, eschewing both undue confidence in human achievement or merit; and the overwhelming sense of guilt, which is the negative aspect of being centered on oneself and seeking for some means to propitiate God's wrath. By contrast with this, God is seen to declare His love for us at our most unacceptable. It is God's identification with humanity and His loving acceptance of the worst that we can do that makes repentance and confession a way of rediscovering God and oneself, and thereby of being set on the road to a full and loving relationship with God and with others. There is no mention in Scripture of the word “guilt” (*ενοχή*), although there is the adjective “guilty” (*ενοχος*). Instead of “guilt” there is “sin” (*αμαρτία*) - failure, loss, a break-up in relations, resulting in a kind of false consciousness. Even “*ενέχομαι*” implies keeping fast within, cherishing, sharing, as distinct from being ashamed in the face of God who inflicts retributive punishment.

A break in communication or communion can lead to pathological forms of guilt. But there is also a guilt born of a sense of responsibility for others as well as for oneself, leading one to an awareness of other people. The Christian view of humanity is largely a social one. Where there is a breakdown in personal love, or a rise in institutionalism, one finds a thickening of the atmosphere of guilt.

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Its antidote is collective confession, communal prayer to “our Father.” A saint might confess daily without fear of neurosis, because he is in constant communion with God and humanity. The acknowledgment of one’s limitations leads to personal communion with God who alone can erase sin: “I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity. Then You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5).

Through the forgiveness of sins in confession, the past is no longer an intolerable burden but rather an encouragement for what lies ahead. Life acquires an attitude of



expectation, not of despondency; and confession becomes the way out of the impasse caused by sin. In this respect, repentance is also an eschatological act, realizing in our very midst, here and now, the promises of the age to come. Looking back-wards would seem to imply the fate of Lot’s wife (Genesis 19:26); ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’ (Luke 9:62). God Himself is revealed before us and walks in front of us. “One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13).